

Masquerade
and
the
Nameless
Women

Eiji Mikage

Translated by Daniel Morales

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First published in Japan in 2017 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo English language version produced by Vertical, Inc.

Published by Vertical, Inc., New York, 2019

Cover art by Hiro Kiyohara This is a work of fiction.

Ebook ISBN 9781949980240

First Edition Vertical, Inc.

451 Park Avenue South

7th Floor

New York, NY 10016

www.vertical-inc.com

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About the Author

Editor's Note:

LINE, a social media app mentioned throughout this text, is a popular free communications app with messaging and video and audio call functions. Users make an account and can sign in through the Internet through multiple electronic devices including smartphones, tablets, and computers. It is developed by Line Corporation.

Prologue II

The serial killer Seiren Higano had rules.

He always wore a white lab coat when he killed. He only targeted beautiful, elegant young women. He always took one part of their bodies. And he cut off their faces. However, it wasn't as though he cared so much about beautiful women or had a fetish for a specific body part. These rules were only meant to send a signal to others.

“Well then,” Higano said. “What am I going to do now?”

He took off his white coat, speckled with blood. Underneath, a bespoke black Armani suit skimmed over the lines of his lean physique. He folded the white coat carefully so as not to stain his suit, and hung it over his arm. The refined gesture gave him the air of a capable butler swiftly clearing away his master's tablecloth.

Higano glanced down at the dead body.

The muddy waters of Tokyo Bay washed in gentle waves against the concrete tetrapod blocks near the shore. On top of one block lay the body of a beautifully-proportioned woman. She was dead. A slender leg dipped into the water. It was easy to imagine that, when she'd been alive, she'd been captivating: her slender, seductive limbs stretched out from a flashy, well-tailored dress. She had a beauty mark on her collar bone that heightened her charm. Her long, well-manicured nails were blood-red and even a little mysterious.

But this glamorous mystique was quickly punctured.

Her beautiful left leg was severed at the ankle. The foot was gone.

The corpse's face had also been scraped off so the contours were ruined. Her once-elegant features were completely unrecognizable.

These signs all suggested the crime had been committed by Seiren Higano, also known as the serial killer Masquerade.

However, throughout his career Higano had removed many faces, and he judged the technique used on this corpse as extremely crude. The lips and everything on the face above the nose remained intact; conversely,

the neck had been needlessly cut up. It wasn't very attractive.

"This is unacceptable."

Higano turned his head and averted his gaze, unable to look any longer.

He calmed down quickly once he could no longer see the body.

—

The serial killer Masquerade.

His name came from his trick of cutting his victims' faces off, as well as an urban legend that witnesses of the crimes had seen a man wearing a mask. It wasn't clear who had started the rumor. However, as his killings on Odaiba went unchecked and the case got bigger and bigger, that name, which had begun online, permeated society at large. Now there wasn't a single person in all of Japan who didn't know about Masquerade.

He was a serial killer who killed victim after victim, but left no traces behind. The story stirred the public's imagination, leading to a froth of discussion as to his true identity. Some thought there were multiple killers, some that the killings were conducted by the mafia, and still others firmly believed that it was the establishment, that the whole thing had been made up, or even that the paranormal was involved. The serial killer Masquerade had, irrationally, become such a large presence in society that for each crazy rumor there was certainly a contingent willing to believe it.

But in the end everyone's inflated imaginations would fail them.

They would discover that Masquerade wasn't anyone powerful or fantastic—he was only the forgettable Seiren Higano.

—

As the serial killer Seiren Higano strolled along on his usual morning walk, he mulled over using Crystal Mountain or Mandarin beans for his coffee. He smiled and also pondered the target for his next kill.

—

Please note:

This is a personal story based on the serial killer Seiren Higano's aesthetic.

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Chapter 1

Miss Direction

misdirection - n - (*misdi'rekʃ(ə)n*) 1. An incorrect direction or instruction. An explanation that creates a misunderstanding.

2. In a sleight of hand or a mystery novel, the act of distracting an observer or reader from the trick or the truth of the case. Also, something used to create this effect.

O

Here's the awful truth: I couldn't stop the women.

Skyscrapers in the manufactured cityscape zipped by me as I sped past, pedaling while standing on my basketed bike. Though it was early, the glare of the sun was already bright, and my sweat-drenched white shirt was hardly comfortable. This was the seaside, but it wasn't the least bit refreshing.

May 27th, 9:05 A.M. Early summer, and already the city was sweltering.

As I frantically pumped the pedals, going *click-click-click* underneath me, my skirt began to rise up. I was wearing leggings so this hardly mattered, but someone walking by pointed ostentatiously at me, so I tugged the hem down with one hand. Judging from his clothes, the gawker might have been Chinese. Odaiba had been a popular destination for tourists even before 1999, when the casino-integrated resorts (known as IR) opened, but in recent years it had become a veritable melting pot. I'd learned that when you see Asians, it was easier to guess their nationality by their clothes rather than their looks. Fashion sense doesn't change immediately just because you've moved abroad.

The Odaiba Integrated Tourist Facilities District.

In 1993, when the Special Integrated Resort Areas Promotion Act, aka the IR Promotion Act, went into effect, the government decided to try and bring casinos to Odaiba. When IR got going in 1999, there were some issues: domestically-managed casinos weren't doing well, and Odaiba had become more dangerous as organized crime began to nudge its way in. However, by the time the "integrated resorts" were really picking up steam two years later in 2001, the government had reached its limit with domestically-managed casinos and opened bidding for the management rights internationally, which helped improve the situation. The Hong Kong-based Melto Crown Entertainment's entrance into the market marked the beginning of the upturn.¹ As other foreign firms arrived, domestic corporations copied the operations of the foreign ones, and conditions improved dramatically. This was true with safety as well. A

massive infusion of foreign investment diluted the influence of organized crime, and a renewal of the police system, with a focus on the Tokyo Bay Police, decreased the crime rate in Odaiba even as levels elsewhere remained the same.

The overall number of tourists visiting last year surpassed 30 million, and the casinos brought in over two trillion and seventy million yen in annual profits. The Odaiba Integrated Tourist Facilities District had become one of the biggest tourist destinations in the world in both name and reality. Stunning hotels pulse in the vivid spark of LED lights, and there's no sign of the typically delicate Japanese atmosphere, which has instead been replaced by everyday encounters with cosplaying samurai and ninja, and sushi shops, packed one right next to another, stuffed with specialties developed for the foreign tourists: sushi topped with Sriracha, chocolate sushi, and deep-fried futomaki-ish sushi rolls (if you could even call that "sushi"). One iekei-style ramen chain with pork broth was listed in every foreign guidebook and has itself become an Odaiba attraction, the chain's shops packed with an endless throng of foreigners. Pawn Alley, a street lined with pawnshops, has also become something of a hotspot.

Because of the nature of my work, I saw people bankrupted by gambling pretty regularly, so I'd never felt the desire to gamble myself, but I had indulged in Cirque du Soleil shows and the occasional swim in hotel pools. Whether you liked it or not, a sense of elation bubbled up from the earth in Odaiba and, for better or worse, made you constantly wired.

The Odaiba Integrated Tourist Facilities District swelled with desire and the currency of foreign countries. It could no longer be contained by the original small patch of land reclaimed from Tokyo Bay and had started to expand like an amoeba. The sound of construction projects reclaiming land echoed across the city. Once a reclamation was complete, another new casino was put up.

I rode along streets far from the gaudy casino area, lined with apartments built by the Urban Renaissance Agency. Eventually I made it to a park built for local residents, not tourists, bordering a city waterway.

I hit the brakes, and my poor bike unleashed a loud screech and came to a stop.

The investigative unit had arrived long before I did. I'd been to this park many times before, but the scene had taken on a serious air now that it was lined with police vehicles. I'd been told the park was part of a designated walking path to school for kindergartners, but there was no way they'd be able to use it today. Rubberneckers had gathered around with no clue of what was going on, crowding around a stranger's misfortune like it was the climactic scene of a movie they didn't want to miss.

I hated this part of the job.

It was my line of work, and I knew I shouldn't let something so trivial get to me, but it still hurt every damn time.

I took a deep breath, exhaled all of my gloom, and then stepped over the yellow police tape.

"Excuse me, lady." A uniformed officer approached me immediately. "You can't just waltz in here."

I had anticipated this, so I quickly pulled my police pass case out from my back pocket and opened it with a flip.

"I'm Sergeant Yuri Uguisu with the Tokyo Bay 1st Investigative Unit," I said. "Reporting for duty."

"Yeah, right," the officer sneered. "What the hell is this toy? Keep acting up and I'll take you in for obstructing an officer!" The officer grabbed me by the back of my neck.

"What? Wait a second! I actually *am* a police sergeant!"

"Yeah, right. If you want to play cops and robbers, I'll let you know when I get off work."

There was nothing I could do. The brawny, uniformed officer was about to throw me out on my ass, so I flailed my hands in panic.

That's when I noticed a man with a stubbled face watching this pathetic

scene with a grin, as though it had nothing to do with him.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Yamaji! Come clear this up!”

“Oh,” Yamaji said and scratched at his disheveled hair. “Yeah, sure.” He placed a hand on the officer’s shoulder. “Officer. Princess here is the genuine article. She’s a career officer on training assignment with the Bay Station. Well, semi-career at least.”

“Huh?” The officer blinked. Still baffled, he finally took a real look at my police ID. He realized it was without a doubt the genuine article. He quickly released me, his superior. His face went pale, and he saluted me. “P-Pardon me, Sergeant Uguisu. I’ve heard your name before.”

What had he heard? I don’t mean to brag, but I was, after all, a legend for setting the record for lowest grades ever in judo, aikido, and arrest techniques at the Police Academy.

“Well,” Yamaji said. “It’s no surprise he made that mistake. You don’t look like police at all. You’re so young. I mean...” The grin on Yamaji’s face started to get wider. “You *are* cosplaying in a sailor school uniform right now, Princess.”

“C-Cosplay? This uniform is for work! And cut it out with the ‘Princess.’”

He was right about the uniform, but of course I wasn’t dressed up like a school girl because I wanted to. Nonozuki in the Community Safety Section had asked me to help out with an undercover operation in a case involving a pervert who liked to cut off locks of hair from high school girls on their way to school. Recently the culprit had accidentally sliced the neck of one young girl with his knife, resulting in a minor wound, so the case had taken on a greater urgency.

Yamaji, my supervisor, was already well aware of all this. But the bastard had just been laughing it up from the time I got to the scene. And Yamaji was basically a boring old man. He wore the standard police-issue suits until they were threadbare, so I was loath to take any wardrobe criticism from him.

“Your message *said* to come ASAP,” I protested. “I had no choice but to come as I was!”

“Still,” Yamaji said. “You had enough time for a change of clothes.”

“I didn’t!”

“When women are really embarrassed, nothing’ll stop them from changing. But you didn’t. So what I’m saying is that somewhere deep down inside you thought you’d look good.”

My face burned. H-How was I supposed to feel?! I’d put a uniform on for the first time in forever and it fit as perfectly as when I’d been in school!

“I’m only twenty-four,” I said quietly. “People think I’m a high schooler all the time. I even get carded when I buy beer.” I tried to pout.

“That’s probably because you don’t wear any makeup and you have no sex appeal. That’s different from looking young.”

Even if that’s what he was thinking, did he have to come right out and say it? Yamaji was just as he appeared: a complete brute!

Yamaji ignored how pissed off I was and unwrapped a lollipop, an incongruous accessory. In an even more hateful voice he muttered, “A high-school girl? Haaa. There’s no way they’d mistake you for one. You’ve lost all that high-school girl goodness from your skin and your aura. Overall you’ve kind of faded.”

Yamaji’s wife had recently run off, and I hoped she kept on running! I hoped she divorced him and got a huge settlement!

“Stop kidding yourself, Princess.”

I wanted to shout, “You’re the only jackass kidding around!” but Yamaji had gotten a serious look on his face, so I bit my tongue.

Inspector Enishi Yamaji: His slovenly appearance made me want to brand him an idiot over and over again, but he was a shrewd veteran who had solved a few difficult cases that had been nearly given up as unsolvable. His recent work especially was spectacular, with him solving

several brutal crimes rapidly before an investigative task force could even be organized.

I had only been working under Yamaji for two months, but as you might expect, I'd realized he wasn't just an unpleasant old man. I should mention his eyes in particular. At times the glint in his eye harbored the edge of a freshly sharpened blade. And he somehow still had a strong sense of justice like an idealistic rookie, despite seeing so many of the worst aspects of the world since joining the force.

I didn't want to admit it, but somewhere inside me I had a deep respect for Yamaji. His slovenly appearance made me want to suppress this feeling, but it couldn't be helped. Deep inside me somewhere...there was the slightest...the most minuscule amount of respect for him.

So, yeah, this was the guy who had called me in so urgently.

"Could we actually have another Masquerade murder on our hands?!" I asked.

Yamaji didn't say yes or no. He placed the lollipop in his mouth in an almost obscene way and raised an eyebrow. "I can't confirm it categorically, but the face has been cut off."

I ran to look. A black guardrail with spots of red rust separated the park from the waterway. I climbed over it and down onto one of the massive, concrete tetrapod blocks at the water's edge.

I could see a woman's thin legs submerged in the water. The skin had started to blacken and was clearly devoid of life.

I gulped and steeled myself. This was my first time seeing a corpse at a crime scene. You're fine, I repeated in my head. I had read all of the Masquerade case files so many times that they were basically seared into my mind. I had also seen the photographs of Masquerade's victims so often that they appeared in my dreams. I should have been prepared to see an actual in-the-flesh corpse.

Then I spotted the corpse just beyond Forensics Division's Sergeant Omori.

“Ah...” I muttered. The moment I saw the faceless corpse, my legs started to buckle. I narrowly managed to avoid falling by reaching out and grabbing the tetrapod with my right hand.

“*Huh?*” Yamaji said incredulously. “You’re so green you can’t look at a mangled body?”

What...I couldn’t help it. This wasn’t just any old dead body. The flesh from the nose and below had been exposed, and the bones were sticking out.

“The corpse belongs to one Reina Myoko,” Yamaji rattled off. “She didn’t have a wallet or cell phone, but there did happen to be a gym membership card in her pocket.”

“W-Wait a second,” I said.

“What? If you’re gonna puke, go do it where there’s nobody around.”

“Not that! Tell me her name again.”

“Reina Myoko.”

I looked at the corpse again. A stylish woman my age wearing a nicely-cut dress. There was a beauty mark on her collarbone.

I’d seen her before.

“I think she might be my high school classmate.”

Yamaji itched at his head like he was confused. “Well, damn...I guess I’m sorry to hear that. Looks like you might actually have a connection to Masquerade after all, Princess.” He composed himself and then focused his gaze. “So, what’re you gonna do? If she’s your classmate, do you plan to run home and curl up in bed like a scaredy cat?”

“What?” I asked.

Yamaji would usually never say something so harsh.

I could feel something growing inside me, and it wasn’t anger—it was courage. This was, in his own special way, his attempt to encourage me.

This was it. I’d become a police officer for one reason and one reason

alone: to arrest the serial killer Masquerade. So I couldn't let myself be flustered the first time I found myself at a crime scene that resembled Masquerade's.

"Alright!" I patted myself on the cheeks to pump myself up again. I got up and brushed the sand off my skirt.

It felt like some strange sign that I was wearing the sailor uniform from when Reina and I had been classmates.

"Looks like you're going to manage," Yamaji said. He took out his police notebook and strained his eyes at it. "From the way you're saying 'classmate,' I'm starting to think that you two weren't all that close..."

"I haven't seen her since we graduated from Junseiwa Academy, the all-girls high school we went to. Even when we were classmates, we didn't have the same classes and weren't all that close."

"Junseiwa Academy? You must've been *surrounded* by other princesses at that place. Is your family filthy rich?"

"No...My family was your pretty typical middle class family. It felt like I was being forced to fulfill my mother's dreams by going to Junseiwa. It was tough on my parents' finances, and I thought my going just caused problems...I mean, they didn't have to worry about me! In other words, I was just a regular student. She was different."

"What you're saying is the victim was a genuine princess?"

"I think so. I didn't know about the specifics of her home life, so I don't have any proof, but everything she wore during that time were high-end items that most high school girls don't have. Even at a school for upper-class girls, she was really popular."

"Hmph. Even without her face I can sort of tell that she was beautiful."

As Yamaji said, although now a faceless body, her luxurious, flashy lifestyle hadn't changed. Her lips were mostly intact despite the face being ripped up. They'd blackened and lost all their red color, but I was still drawn to how full they were.

And when I saw them, her charming voice came to life in my mind.

“Hey, do you know what a misdirection is?”

Ah yes, I remembered. She had a high-pitched, feminine voice that lingered like the vibrato from a violin. Her exact features somehow never stayed with me, but I remembered being impressed over and over by her attractive voice.

“She’s beautiful.” She’d been the kind of woman who made people say that unthinkingly.

But why? Sure, she was incredibly beautiful, yet *for the life of me* I couldn’t recall her face.

When I saw her, I was gripped by that first impression of her being *beautiful*—it was so strong that it swept aside any other thoughts and prevented me from remembering what she looked like. So she was hazy in my mind.

That had been true back when we were students. I remembered that she had a beauty mark on her collarbone, but whenever I went to look at her face, I always had to pore over every inch before I realized, ah yes, *that’s* what her face was like.

Images from that time were running vividly through my mind, despite the fact that her precise features eluded me.

The back of my mind was filled with a dissolving crimson color.

—

Ahh, that day had made such an impression on me. So much so that it’s strange I’d forgotten about it until now.

In high school I had been on the badminton team (I was only a backup’s backup), and on that particular day we had practice as usual. But during the first breather, I realized I’d forgotten my water bottle in my locker and went back to the classroom to get it.

The school building was very quiet during the extracurricular period, and I didn’t pass anyone in the hallways. The late afternoon sun poured

in through the windows almost aggressively, and my eyes hurt as they were filled with the crimson light.

Reina Myoko was, for some reason, reading a book by herself in the classroom.

She seemed to have taken the intense afternoon sun captive and leashed it under her control. The setting sun had transformed her from a girl hunched over, turning the pages of a book, into someone in a movie scene.

She stood up, still unaware of me, and opened the window. I watched to see what she would do. She looked affectionately at the hardcover book and touched the open page. Then, without any hesitation, she began to tear the page out—*rippppp, rippppp*—without any change in expression. She persisted until the page was shredded into small pieces. She tore up several more pages, and then took the pieces and threw them out of the window.

The scraps of paper fluttered gently in the crimson sky like the petals of cherry blossoms.

There was something awful about that scene. It felt like Reina had calmly stepped past some line that shouldn't have been crossed.

However, it was even more beautiful than it was awful. If I'd been holding a DSLR camera instead of my racquet, I would have instinctively snapped a few photos at that moment. Ah, if only I *had* taken her picture, then I never would've forgotten what she looked like.

But when I snapped out of my daze, I didn't feel right. I'd run into a classmate in an empty classroom. Even if I managed not to address the whole book thing, I was going to have to say something to her. This wasn't even her classroom. Why was she there in the first place?

I was now faced with a very pragmatic problem, the exact opposite of the illusory scene I'd just encountered: What I was going to say to this girl I didn't know very well?

I don't remember exactly, but I must've come up with something

harmless to say. Given my lower-middle class background, I must've resorted to a silly grin.

Ahh, now I was remembering! Reina Myoko had been exchanging the appropriate pleasantries with my awkward self, when she suddenly opened her eyes wide with surprise.

"Hey, Yuri," she greeted me. That reminded me—she called classmates by their first names, whether she was close with them or not. "Your fingers are so lovely."

I had trouble believing someone as beautiful and special as Reina really thought someone so commonplace as me had lovely hands.

"Everyone is always complimenting mine..." I said. "They say that only my right hand is perfect. I always want to tell them that saying 'only' is rude!"

"Is there something wrong with your left?" she asked. "Ahh...you've got scars."

"Yeah. When I was little, I was holding hands with my sister while we were running in this big park, and when I fell down...umm, ha ha."

I laughed uncomfortably. I wasn't sure how much I could say to her. But Reina ignored me and the scars on my left hand. She seemed to be captivated by my right hand.

"Ah, ha ha...Stop staring," I joked. "My right hand is nice, but you're beautiful all over."

"It's just that I have a slightly better sense of how I appear to the world than others do." Then she added a comment I didn't understand: "I don't have real beauty in the way that your fingers do. Your right hand is the real thing. One of a kind, unlike me." Then Reina Myoko smiled elegantly. "Hey, do you know what a misdirection is?" she said suddenly.

Confused, I said, no, I didn't.

"It's a technique used in a sleight of hand trick. It means 'to shift the focus of the audience.' By getting the audience's attention with an

exaggerated gesture or something, you conceal from them the most important part of the trick...But I think it's not just for sleight of hand tricks, don't you think? It happens all the time in reality. People miss the most important thing because there's something flashy right in front of them."

This was the first time I'd ever heard her talk so much at once, and I interspersed the conversation with sounds of approval and understanding despite my confusion.

"For example," she continued. "Say you have a beautiful flower in a vase. Everyone would be paying attention to the beautiful petals on the flower. But what if the vase was actually full of muddy water? Super dirty water from the day after a heavy rain that even water bugs would hesitate to go near. The water should be changed right away, but because the flower's so pretty no one ever thinks the water's dirty. So the flower withers."

When she finished, she quietly turned away from me. It seemed she had realized how strange it was to talk about this kind of stuff with someone she wasn't close friends with.

Flustered and confused, I asked about what I'd just seen, without really thinking it through. "Hey," I said. "Why were you ripping up that book just now?"

Reina stared into my eyes, as though she were testing me, but she didn't seem upset.

"It was a beautiful story," she said. "The sentences flowed like a stream. The psychology was subtle, like the author had peered into the human soul with a microscope. And the overall composition was supported by a structure as natural as the human skeleton. At the same time, the story was incredibly warm, and the immediacy of the author's love for fiction really came through."

She turned away from me again. Behind her, the setting sun was turning a burnt umber color, creating a dramatic backdrop.

She added, finally, "That's why I wanted to rip it up."

I took another close look at the lips of the corpse on the tetrapod. Her words were still incredibly fresh in my mind.

Out of the blue, I suddenly remembered her nickname, which I had learned only after that conversation. The nickname she got because she was so beautiful you always wanted to look away: “Miss Direction.”

While I was lost in reverie, the brawny officer who had nearly kicked me out earlier ran over toward us.

“Yamaji!” he yelled, clearly in a panic. “Sergeant Uguisu! Umm, uh...” He struggled to catch his breath. “I heard...heard something from this other officer.”

“Where’s the fire, man?” Yamaji drawled. “Just breathe a sec.”

“S-Sure,” the officer huffed.

It was kind of cute to see the brawny guy follow Yamaji’s orders so obediently.

“Whew,” he panted. “Um, well, last night there was a report submitted to the Sumida Ward station, and it might be related to this case! The report apparently stated something about a woman’s foot being found in her boyfriend’s room and that she’d gotten caught up in something.”

Yamaji squinted alarmingly, urging the officer to get to the point.

“A man named Shota Akiyama submitted the report,” he said. “And his girlfriend’s name was Reina Myoko.”

¹ A play on the existing “Melco Resorts.”

The Tokyo Bay Police was reputedly the busiest police force in Japan.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department had previously operated on a “Districts” system that divided Station jurisdictions into ten geographical blocks, but the Tokyo Bay Station’s expansion forced the TMPD to designate the Tokyo Bay Station the new “11th District,” effectively making it independent. The TMPD gave the Tokyo Bay Station authority second only to headquarters when it came to crime associated with the Odaiba Integrated Tourist Facilities District. This meant that the Tokyo Bay Station more often than not operated on its own. But it also feuded with the TMPD and the other Stations, whose officers hated basically everyone at Tokyo Bay.

The buildings making up the police station in Tokyo Bay and the force itself expanded piecemeal. The three buildings that made up the Tokyo Bay Police Station were surrounded by a thick concrete wall. The Station was ridiculed as the “Patchwork Fortress” because of its intimidating appearance so shoddily fitted together.

At night when the rest of this part of the city was adorned with flashes of color, the Fortress stood out with a gloomy, ominous air all its own. Rumor had it that the TMPD intentionally designed the “fortress” for this effect to assert control in Odaiba during a period of unrest. But with this, even if a criminal decided to turn himself in, one look at this building and he’d piss his pants and reverse course.

I rode towards the Patchwork Fortress on my trusty, two-wheeled steed and immediately headed to the locker room to take off my school-girl outfit. I was standing in my underwear when I glanced at my watch (a favorite that I’d picked up at a New Year’s sale) and noticed that it was 11.

I hadn’t said anything to Yamaji about the conversation I had had with Reina Myoko that one day after school. I wasn’t at all sure whether it had anything to do with the case, and besides, it was embarrassing for me to talk about those formative years of my life.

And now we had a report from Reina's boyfriend...

I tried to imagine what her boyfriend looked like, but I couldn't imagine what walk of life he'd come from. She wouldn't have been a good match with someone in a generally well-respected profession such as a professional athlete, a young entrepreneur, an actor, or a politician.

It's possible that if I saw Reina's face now, I might think she was an incredibly normal person. I might be exaggerating her mystique to myself because we'd met as adolescents.

"But..." I still wanted to believe that Reina Myoko was special, and I trusted that instinct.

I changed into my brand new suit from Yofuku no Midoriyama² and headed to Reina's apartment, riding alongside Yamaji in a police vehicle.

—

Reina's rented apartment was not far from a shopping arcade in a blue-collar *shitamachi* neighborhood filled with a mix of new and old buildings. Several police vehicles were parked on the narrow streets, from which the towering futuristic spindle of the Tokyo Skytree was visible, intruding upon the neighborhood's old-fashioned character.

At a month-to-month parking lot placed quite a distance from Reina's apartment, I noticed two other parked cars.

Reina's apartment, located in the middle of the bustling shopping arcade, was an aged wooden building whose character fit right into the *shitamachi* neighborhood.

To be honest, I found it strange that Reina lived in such a pedestrian building. The rundown, wooden structure didn't even have security cameras; the whole place was at odds with her flashy looks.

We were greeted by a man with thick arms and eyebrows. "Hey," he said. "You must be Yamaji from the 11th. We've heard you like to play fast and loose with jurisdiction. What the hell brings you all the way over here?"

This must have been the investigator from Mukojima Station. He stared at Yamaji. His intensity chilled me, but Yamaji only gave him an indifferent glance before zipping up the stairs to the apartment.

“Looks like the rumors were right,” the investigator drawled, seemingly unimpressed by Yamaji’s cool response. “You go where you please without waiting for orders.”

Yamaji just frowned and said, “Shut your hole, man. Yapping about jurisdiction isn’t gonna solve cases.” He stepped into the apartment, and I rushed to follow.

The room was a 10-mat studio with a separate kitchen. The flooring was unnaturally new, suggesting it’d been redone recently, and the bathroom and prefab kitchen were also relatively new, but still, overall, the rent for the place couldn’t have been all that high. This was in no way a room where a princess from Junseiwa Academy would live.

Maybe her family hadn’t been so wealthy after all? Had she come from an ordinary family just like me?

Other than the forensics ID tags placed around the room, at first glance it looked like an ordinary room with only the bare minimum of things. There was no extraneous furniture to give the place any personality, making it seem the residence of a cold minimalist.

But I started to get a bad feeling.

“Huh?” I asked. “I feel like something’s off.”

I took another look around the unusual room, which had no business being unusual.

Something was definitely off. The first thing I noticed was that there were a lot of clothes. But the styles all seemed scattershot, without any unifying theme throughout, and it was impossible to get a sense of the owner’s tastes. The clothes seemed as though they could have been a careless assortment of gifts.

It was then I realized that, even aside from the clothes, the other objects in the room also seemed to lack consistency in the same way. I had

missed this upon first glance because as a whole the place seemed tasteful enough, despite the eclectic assortment of things.

I'd never seen a room like this before.

Yamaji had a stern look on his face and also appeared to be in tune with the faint but definite sense of unease I had.

The forensics team had finished, and Reina's foot was, of course, already long gone.

I tried to sort through everything we'd learned so far.

There were no visible abnormalities in the flooring, and from the luminol test we also knew there were no traces of blood. Maybe the killer had used a sheet of some kind to prevent blood stains. There were also no signs that fingerprints had been wiped from doorknobs or other places the killer would've had to touch with his hands.

According to Shota Akiyama's account in the report, he had received a call from Reina the previous night at 7:11 P.M. while he was in the break room at the convenience store where he worked. It was a blank call. On Reina's LINE account there had been a 15-second call recorded in the history. But she didn't pick up even when he called back, which Akiyama thought was strange, so he prepared to go home right away and then apparently headed to her apartment.

He arrived at the apartment at 7:45 P.M., roughly 30 minutes later, and rang the doorbell. However, because she didn't respond, he let himself in with his copy of the key. He had immediately come across her foot and a bloody knife. He called the police at 7:48 P.M. Five minutes later nearby officers rushed to the scene.

The first to discover Reina Myoko's abandoned body was a 71-year-old man who walked near that park every day. He was apparently quite shaken up after discovering the grotesque corpse, missing a foot, with its face cut off.

The results of the investigation were still preliminary, and because one leg had been in the water, the estimated time of death had a large

window. Based on the postmortem rigidity and the state of decomposition, the murder most likely happened between 6:00 P.M. and 12:00 A.M. during the previous night.

Another critical detail was that the immediate cause of death was a cut to her chest, not the loss of her foot or face. She had been stabbed twice and a fragment of the blade of the murder weapon was found in between two of her ribs. One of the strikes had pierced her heart, which was the fatal wound. A knife that had been left in the apartment had been matched with the stab wounds, but the knife itself was mass produced, so it wouldn't be easy to determine where it had been purchased.

She appeared to have been bound; there were traces of rope marks all over her body. We also knew from fibers found between her teeth that she had been gagged with a towel or cloth of some kind. In addition, she had a bruise behind her left knee. It had been caused by tight binding, so we believed the perpetrator had applied a tourniquet when cutting off her foot. Also, her calves and the back of her neck had signs of injections. Detailed testing was still pending, but she might have been drugged. Her foot and face both showed signs of vital reactions, so we knew she'd sustained the injuries while she was alive.

The DNA testing was also still incomplete. However, a dental ID card in her place, which led us to her healthcare provider, had revealed that the dental work on the corpse was a perfect match with a procedure Reina Myoko had done to fix a cavity when she was 21.

So much for the facts.

Based on the evidence we had so far, we could conjecture the following:

The perpetrator broke into her apartment around 7:00 P.M. on the previous night, possibly with the intention of killing her. Reina attempted to call Akiyama, but the intruder found out and turned off the phone. He bound her, and after laying out a tarp to keep blood off the floor, he injected her calf and neck with a local anesthetic, and applied a tourniquet to her left knee. He stabbed her in the chest, and as she went into shock, he cut off her foot and removed her face. He then confirmed

that she was dead, wiped the place for prints, wrapped up the tarp, left the knife and foot in the apartment for whatever reason, and was gone by the time Akiyama arrived at 7:45 P.M. The killer then abandoned the body on the tetrapods near Odaiba.

What the hell was all this?

It didn't make any sense. He'd prepped the anesthetic, so it clearly wasn't a crime of impulse. It did happen quickly, but for a premeditated killing he left a lot of evidence and the execution was also pretty crude.

Did a crime this sloppy really have the mark of the serial killer Masquerade?

I'd read the Masquerade files so many times that I'd nearly stared a hole right through them. All his crimes were so perfectly flawless that it was immediately clear why he hadn't been caught yet. And more than that, although in a way that was difficult to describe, there was a kind of consistency between all of the crimes.

I realized this might be a little strange to say, but all of his crimes had an...aesthetic.

But there weren't any signs of his perfectionism or that aesthetic in *this* crime.

However, some aspects of the shoddy execution did feel intentional.

Yamaji seemed to be thinking the same thing, judging from the way he kept scratching his head, the lollipop still stuck in his mouth.

I felt hesitant about having a serious conversation in a room where someone had just recently been killed, so I led Yamaji out of the apartment.

The garden at Reina's building was the size of a postcard, but it was well-maintained, with roses blossoming around a small fountain. The landlord must've gardened as a hobby. The garden was nice, but I wasn't exactly in the mood to enjoy the scenery. Yamaji sat down in a garden chair.

“Masquerade *always* takes the body part he cuts off,” I said. “So far, there have been *zero* cases where he left it at the scene.”

Yamaji chewed on his lollipop. “That information hasn’t been made public yet,” he said.

I knew what he was trying to say.

“I know. But do you really think there could be...others?”

Yamaji scratched at his stubble. “Obviously he’s the only crackpot who does it as a hobby,” he said. “But by now everyone in the country knows that Masquerade cuts off his victims’ faces and a piece of their bodies.”

“So basically what you’re saying is that the perp didn’t know that Masquerade takes the body parts away? And that someone is trying to frame Masquerade?”

“Yeah, well,” Yamaji sighed. “I’m not going to sign my name to it. But it’s within the realm of possibility.”

“But...” I caught myself. I thought about the sense of unease I felt when looking at the crime scene, and Yamaji’s hypothesis made sense.

But *I* wanted to be the one to arrest Masquerade. So I wanted it to be Masquerade who committed this crime, even if that was an awful thing to want.

“I’m only going to say it once, Princess.” Yamaji scratched at his disheveled hair and gave me the side-eye. “If you can’t look at this case objectively, you should bench yourself from the investigation. Everyone at the station knows you’re obsessed with Masquerade. If the brass decide that you’re some bozo who runs after every shadow that even remotely resembles him, they’ll never let you on a case again.”

I gasped. “You’re right. I’ll be more careful...” If I was actually hoping Masquerade had committed the crime here, then I’d definitely lost perspective. “I-I’ll calm down!”

“You really think you can?” Yamaji asked.

“Yes!” I said. “I’ll be sure to take into account the fact that it might not

have been him.”

But with the prospect of Masquerade being apprehended just around the corner, I’d already lost some objectivity. And the fact that this time the victim also happened to be my classmate, the otherworldly Reina Myoko, really made me doubt I’d be able to do my job dispassionately.

Yamaji surely knew this about me and was still putting me on the case. I couldn’t let him down.

I slapped my cheeks to refocus.

Suddenly, a voice I didn’t recognize called out from behind me, “This is some serial killer shit up in here!”

Just inside the entranceway, a young man with dyed brown hair permed into tight ringlets stood, staring at me. I instinctively cowered at the crazy, bloodshot look in his eyes.

“I knew he was fucking strange...” His voice was filled with anger. “*He’s* the one who did this!”

Yamaji stood up, stepped in front of me as a cover, and confronted the guy. “Forgive me,” he hesitated. “But who are you?”

“I’m Shota Akiyama, Reina’s boyfriend!”

“Ah...the one who filed the report.”

“That’s right!”

Shota Akiyama was 25 years old, a year older than Reina. We knew he got by with a part-time job at a convenience store and that he played in a band that wasn’t very popular.

I looked at him again and saw dark circles shadowing his eyes. Of course he was a little on edge: He had realized his girlfriend was dead after finding her foot in her apartment, and undoubtedly hadn’t been able to sleep well. My initial negative impression was completely turned around, and I found myself filled with sympathy for him.

However, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking: *This guy* had been who Reina was dating?

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Yamaji said, unaware of how flustered I was. “Forgive me, but...What exactly did you mean by ‘him’?” He smiled when he asked the question to show the kid he didn’t mean any harm, but he was only managing to smile with one side of his mouth, so he was probably somewhere closer to the textbook definition of a smirk.

I’d thought this about other veteran officers in the past, too, but if you stay in the force long enough, the work will kill the smile in your eyes. If I was at this crime scene any longer, it could well happen to me, too.

Akiyama was too distracted to notice Yamaji’s awkward smile. He raised his voice like he’d been waiting for the question. “It’s obvious! Ken Nakahigashi! Reina’s fiancé.”

“Fiancé, you say?” Yamaji had seemed worn out up to this point, but a light flashed in his eyes and he suddenly seemed transformed.

I flipped open my notebook. At the academy we learned that most murders involve money or sex. We couldn’t blindly accept Akiyama’s claims as fact, but they were definitely an important account.

“Well, damn...a marriage of convenience?” Yamaji asked. He lifted his eyes and glanced around Room 202, the place Reina had called home. I could see a thought pass through him as he blatantly sized the place up: Why would a woman wrapped up with two guys like this live in such a ramshackle place?

“Excuse me,” I interrupted. “Did you know her fiancé well?”

“No,” he said. “I only met him once. But that was enough to know the guy’s rotten through and through. He’s garbage. A heartless, lowlife psychopath. The only reason someone like that gets married is because he thinks there’s some kind of upside to it!”

Trouble had been brewing on the home front. Yamaji had on his poker face. “So, what about Reina?” he asked. “What did she say about Nakahigashi? Did she hate him as much as you did?”

“No. She never talked about him around me, maybe because she didn’t want to hurt my feelings. She was a sweetheart. She really was.” Akiyama

burst into tears, perhaps in memory.

I found myself holding my breath. I still couldn't imagine Reina dating this guy, but his feelings for her were without a doubt the real deal.

I tried to imagine the awful circumstances he was going through. He had received a strange phone call from his girlfriend and ran to her place to find a severed foot that seemed to be hers. Fighting back his worst fears and praying that she was safe, he found out that the worst had indeed come to pass and she was dead.

I kind of knew what he was going through.

"I can tell you're nice, too," Akiyama said, which made me realize that my eyes were tearing up.

"Oh, please excuse me," I said. "I know officers aren't supposed to get like this, but I'm still pretty green."

Yamaji scratched at his head. "It's not great to get so worked up, but with this case, it's basically unavoidable. I'll cover whatever you can't handle." He patted me gently on top of my head.

"Uhh...Yamaji?" I said.

"What now?" he asked. "Has my sudden kindness tugged at your heartstrings?"

"Please don't touch my head. I know you're trying to encourage me, but it makes me feel uncomfortable...on a very visceral level...sorry."

"Wh-What?" Yamaji opened his eyes widely in genuine surprise, and then seemed a little ashamed.

Sorry, man, I thought to myself. But, look—basically every woman in the world hates being patted on the head by old men who don't even register to them as a member of the opposite sex. I felt like I'd been a pretty considerate representative of women everywhere by letting him know.

"By the way, Akiyama," I added casually. "If you have any photos of Reina, would you mind sharing them with us? Even just a digital file

would be fine.”

I asked partly because it was necessary for the investigation, but also partly because I’d forgotten what she looked like and was curious to see. It wasn’t an unreasonable request at all.

But her boyfriend’s response wasn’t what I expected.

“I don’t have any photos,” he said flatly. He transformed completely and his face took on a blank look. Then he proved he had no interest in addressing the issue any further by emphasizing, with a note of finality, “Not a single one.”

² A play on the existing “Yofuku no Aoyama” clothing store.

3

After leaving Reina Myoko's apartment, I went back to the Tokyo Bay Station where I sat at my desk. I stared at my laptop for a little while, but my focus drifted and all of the letters started to blur together.

It was already 5:00 P.M.

My standard-issue steel desk was as organized as I could get it. There was an open space in front of me with just enough room for my head. I planted my face down like I was being sucked into the desk.

He didn't have any photos at all?

Akiyama had explained Reina really didn't like having her picture taken. Still, it was difficult to imagine a couple not taking photos with each other.

Then maybe he was lying about the fact that they were dating?

I had trouble even imagining that the two had been dating, so I was slightly fixated on the idea that he was lying. But if that was the case, he would've been faking all that grief...which I couldn't believe. Those tears had to be the real thing.

We didn't find any photos at the apartment. Nor did we find her smartphone or any trace of her on photo-sharing apps.

I had asked that my graduation yearbook be sent from home. And when I received it, I quickly realized something: Reina's photo wasn't in the yearbook.

Reina wasn't in her class picture or picture of the entire school. She hadn't been absent or anything, and I remembered even then I had been confused as to why she wasn't in the photos.

I don't know why, but Reina had avoided leaving any traces of herself in photographs even then.

"Hey, do you know what a misdirection is?"

Had she purposefully been trying to make herself difficult to remember? And now, to top it off, her face had been cut off.

This woman whose face I couldn't remember was now dead, her face removed, and she'd left zero records of what she looked like.

It almost felt too perfect to be coincidence. And if it wasn't a coincidence...could it actually be possible that this case had been ongoing since we were classmates in high school? I had a hunch that something awful was happening, and my heart started to beat faster.

I had to remember more about high school. When I closed my eyes and tried to think back, I was flooded with the saccharine, cotton-candy-like atmosphere of that time. For me, Junseiwa Academy had been an uncomfortable place full of extremely clingy relationships.

Out of that daze, something bizarre floated up in my mind.

Of course, I thought, Reina Myoko and her gang of girlfriends. They were always at her side, like they were in the secret service. All together they created this elegant, showy, almost sacred atmosphere, like a rose garden, one which all the students at Junseiwa Academy longed to be a part of.

However, those girls seemed to believe that they were special because they hung out with Reina, who was special, and they wanted to keep everyone else from having access to that by separating themselves from the rest of us.

At the center of that enclosure was Reina Myoko.

I remembered the names of the girls who formed this exclusive girl gang: Otoha Tamachi, Miyuki Yata, Sena Hagawa, Asami Ino, and Ryoko Omura.

Everyone called them "the Bumblebees" because they buzzed around Reina like she was a flower, or maybe because they stung anyone who tried to get close to her.

I wondered why they did that. I didn't really pay much attention to all the cliques at the time, but now I was starting to feel how strange it was. I

felt like it might have something to do with the case.

I put my hands over my head and wallowed in my thoughts. My laptop chimed with a mail notification. It was from Omori in forensics.

I opened the mail: “I’m writing about the driver’s license photo—it doesn’t look like Reina Myoko had a driver’s license.”

God, she was an idiot.

We knew from Akiyama’s account that Reina owned a red BMW. Which now suggested she owned a luxury automobile despite not having a license?

He said she usually parked her BMW at a pay-by-the-month lot half a mile from her apartment. Patrol vehicles had been parked at the lot near her place because officers from the Mukojima Station were patrolling the area. Akiyama also had no idea why she had such an expensive car.

Plus, the BMW hadn’t been returned to the parking lot. It was possible the murderer used it as a way to transport her body. However, using the victim’s car to transport the body was usually unthinkable. Even if the murderer knew about the car only through a loose acquaintance with Reina, using the car would be tipping the police off and would narrow down the perp profile.

Why did the body need to be moved in the first place? If you move the body, obviously you risk being seen in the process. Why did the killer have to get rid of the body in the park in Odaiba? Did he want the body to be discovered early in the morning?

There was something confusing and elusive about the killer’s actions. This wasn’t just a shoddy attempt to cover his tracks. And it made me sick to think it was intentional.

To begin with...Reina Myoko, that ethereal woman, couldn’t have been just another victim.

We’d determined from her dental records that the corpse was indeed her, but I kept doubting.

“Ughh,” I muttered. I lay my face on the desk and gave up. I’d exceeded my mental capacity. I took my commuter card wallet out from my pants pocket without moving from that defeated position.

I opened the wallet, revealing the face of a young woman, bright as a sunflower.

“Looking at photos again?” Yamaji asked.

I panicked and closed the wallet.

Yamaji hesitated, but in the end decided not to say whatever it was and instead stroked his stubble.

“Princess,” he said. “Now, this is just my impression, but I get the sense that this case isn’t straightforward. It reeks of something fishy. This isn’t going to be open and shut.”

“Ditto,” I agreed.

Part of me was pleased I had the same impression as a veteran officer like Yamaji. But as an officer, I wasn’t thrilled that my instinct was right.

“But here’s the key,” Yamaji said. “We have to solve the damn thing before they put together an investigative task force. And to do that, we need an ace up our sleeve.”

“An ace?” I wrinkled my brow. At the academy we’d learned there were no shortcuts. We were supposed to approach investigations earnestly, one step at a time. An ace up a sleeve was the exact opposite of that.

Yamaji strode quickly toward the window without waiting for my response. He marched right up to Section Chief Masatsugu Otawara like he was pretty proud of himself, looked Otawara in the eye, and for some reason placed a lollipop on his desk.

“I’m gonna do it my way, as usual.” He grinned.

Section Chief Otawara was huge, both vertically and horizontally, forming nearly a perfect sphere. He scratched at his buzzcut and picked up the candy. He opened his eyes so widely they looked like they were going to roll right out of his head, and looked at me.

I never would have said this to his face, but if one of those *tanuki* raccoon dog statues outside restaurants really did transform into a human, I had no doubt that it would look just like Section Chief Otawara.

He scowled and crossed his arms, forcing his already tight-fitting suit to stretch audibly.

“You’re taking Uguisu to see Dr. H already?” he said in a deep voice to Yamaji. “You don’t think it’s a little soon?”

“Well, the Princess has only been working under me for two months,” Yamaji admitted. “But it’s probably all right. Her instincts as an officer notwithstanding, I think we can trust her as a person.”

It was difficult to tell whether I was being complimented or insulted.

“Fine, then,” Otawara shrugged. “I’ll leave it up to you.” He put the lollipop in a desk drawer and curtly returned his attention to paperwork. Yamaji smiled, said “Thanks” quickly, and that ended their interaction.

Despite the awkwardness of their being so near in age but different in ranks, the two of them seemed to have a long-held trust. It was kind of cool to see, to be honest.

“What’s up with the candy?” I asked when Yamaji came back. I was a little embarrassed to ask about something so trivial.

“It’s a little bet we have. He gives me 10 to 1 odds. If they start an investigative task force before I solve it, he keeps it. If I solve it, he gives me ten of them.”

“Those aren’t great odds for you. There’s no way you solve the cases so quickly every time.”

“Oh, you think not?” Yamaji boasted. “I’ll have you know my squad car has been fully stocked with candy for the past year.” He put another lollipop into his mouth with a grin. “You must be at least a little interested as to why I never run out.”

Yamaji parked his personal car, a vintage white Toyota Crown, on the edge of Shinonome in Koto Ward. The single-story house we were headed for had a handsome wood exterior that exuded warmth and style. The building was a little off of the main drag, but for a single-story building surrounded by residential high-rises, it was a pretty luxurious structure.

I got out of the car and took a quick look at the area around the building. Lush trees lined the street in neat rows, and a well-appointed black table had been set up on the terrace. The minimalist sheet-copper door stood out, and all in all the exterior of the building was nicely designed.

“This is crazy!” I cried, awed. “Pretty ritzy café you got here, Yamaji. I thought you were one of those guys who only goes to grungy mahjong parlors!”

“Café?” Yamaji said. “What the hell are you talking about? Read the damn sign! This is Higano Mental Clinic. It’s a psychiatry clinic.”

“What? A hospital?”

I looked at the sign near the entrance and saw that it was exactly as Yamaji said. I couldn’t believe such a fashionable space was a hospital. It had to be some kind of joke.

The sign read “By Appointment Only.” Underneath, the hours noted that it was open until 6:00 P.M. Currently, it was 6:30. If it really was a hospital of some sort, it was already closed.

“And Princess, what was that you said?” Yamaji asked. “Grungy or something rude like that?”

That had been what I’d said, but now wasn’t the time to deal with it, so I ignored him and changed the subject. “So, you’re going to teach me the secret to solving cases, right? You mentioned there’s a secret detective or something?”

Detective.

The character in TV shows and mystery novels who was somehow always pulled into a murder case, had rare powers of insight and deduction, and solved the case without the help of the police. It was a line of work that, in reality, mostly investigated cheating partners, in which the detective acquired personal information through methods of dubious legality, and used that information in fishy ways. That was my image of a detective.

“Don’t get so worked up,” he said. Yamaji gave the copper door a pull, which was locked, so he rang the doorbell.

After a moment, the door opened.

“Hello, Yamaji,” a voice with a nasal twang sounded. A woman stepped out.

She had brown hair which paired well with her fair complexion, done up in an impressive updo that had probably taken hours. Her large eyes were downturned at the ends, and were bright and adorable. Overall, she was so cute people probably wanted to take care of her instinctively. Her makeup was stylish and perfect, but her face was really well balanced and would’ve looked great even without makeup. She seemed to be in her early twenties.

She was a looker from head to toe, and I could tell she knew it. Ninety percent of women probably yelled out, “My God, you’re precious!” the first time they met her. When we looked at each other, she gave me a sweet and subtle smile.

“Ugh,” I muttered. I didn’t have much in terms of feminine charm myself, so I sometimes scowled without realizing it when I was around such perfect tens and had to face my own inferiority. To top it off, next to me my unshaven, middle-aged old man of a partner was openly ogling her. It pissed me off that he’d never looked at me that way.

“You’re not telling me that *this* woman is the detective?” I sniffed.

“Obviously not,” Yamaji retorted. “She’s the receptionist here.”

“This isn’t really a hospital, is it? Where’s the detective?” Was Yamaji messing with me?

“Dr. Higano is still finishing his paperwork,” the woman said. “Please wait inside.” She looked directly at Yamaji and smiled. Which caused him to blush and avert his eyes like he was a teenager. I was totally confused. The stock in Yamaji I’d bought into earlier had peaked and was rapidly plummeting past my stop-loss price.

“So, Yamaji, who is this woman?” she asked and looked deep into my eyes boldly. She wouldn’t have been able to pull this off unless she was seriously self-confident. I wanted to run away.

“This is Uguisu, one of the rookies,” Yamaji introduced me.

“Actually,” I broke in, “I’m Sergeant Yuri Uguisu, with the Tokyo Bay 1st Investigative Unit.”

“Well, well,” she said. “So I see.” She gave my whole body a long, careful, unrestrained look. Suddenly, her expression, which had been relaxed to that point, stiffened into a hard mask.

Her gaze stopped on my right hand, the one that Reina Myoko had complimented.

“Umm, what are you looking at?”

Her smile quickly reappeared, and she giggled. “Just try not to flatter the doctor.”

“What?”

She revealed her name was Erika Shirasu. She gave off a disturbing hostility that only other women would sense as she guided us into the clinic. I noticed her shiny pink nails.

I asked Yamaji, “So this Dr. Higano, is he the detective you’re talking about?”

“That’s correct,” he affirmed. “He’s a psychiatrist as a day job, and a detective on the side. He doesn’t advertise it, but supposedly he’s submitted all the paperwork to be a detective.”

“He gets clients without advertising?”

“He makes enough as a doctor without any clientele as a detective, so he doesn’t seem to mind. That said, he’s got talent, so I think he gets a lot of detective work through word of mouth.”

I took another look around the waiting room to try and get a sense of what kind of person this doctor might be.

Like the exterior, the interior was also a fashionable café incarnate. I had trouble believing it was a hospital, or a detective agency, for that matter. In addition to the leafy-green couch we were sitting on, there were two other stylish sofas, a modern-looking ceiling fan hanging from the white ceiling, and spotlight-style lighting installed evenly throughout. Jazz flowed from the speakers at a perfect volume.

The design alone made it a very strange hospital. But even that was a minor detail compared to the aroma wafting through the waiting room.

The waiting room was rich with the smell of coffee. Behind the reception desk there was a shelf lined with bottles filled with coffee beans, a coffee siphon, and a coffee mill.

Dr. Higano was definitely not your ordinary psychiatrist. I guess that should’ve gone without saying the moment I learned he also moonlighted as a detective.

“Please, have some coffee while you wait,” Erika offered.

She had just finished elegantly preparing pour-overs (I wondered about the unused siphon) and put the mugs on coasters for us. I carefully brought the coffee to my mouth and was overwhelmed by the rich aroma and delicate acidity. I was really more of a tea drinker, but I did love the flavor of coffee. And this was far more delicious than anything a coffee chain could produce.

The flavor was impressive, but I wasn’t in a café. I was in a hospital. The disjunction of the atmosphere and the setting made me unable to enjoy the coffee Erika had gone out of the way to make.

“Excuse me, Erika, do you ever have any patients who have trouble

relaxing in a hospital like this?”

“We definitely do,” she said. “But those patients choose to go somewhere else, so it’s fine. There are psychiatric practices everywhere these days. Patients should choose the hospital for them. Dr. Higano always says that we should provide our services for patients who enjoy them and find them relaxing.”

I might’ve been biased, but that didn’t seem like a good management policy for a hospital.

“But most of the patients really like Dr. Higano,” she continued. “We’re doing so well that we’re basically unable to see new patients.”

To be honest, I was starting to get pretty interested in the Doctor myself.

So I jumped when his deep, booming voice echoed from his exam room: “Sorry to make you wait, Yamaji,” he said. “You can come on in. Erika, you can head out if you like.”

“Ah,” she replied in a sweet voice, instinctively touching her hand to her cheek. “It’s no trouble. I’ll wait until you finish.” She took a fashion magazine from a rack and perched herself on one of the sofas. She undid the bun on her head, put a piece of gum in her mouth, and deftly put her hair into a pony tail on one side of her head. I could almost see the pheromones emanating from the nape of her neck.

Damn, I was impressed. Her feminine wiles were flawless. It was as though she were constantly under observation by some organization dedicated to the assessment of feminine charm.

“Time to go, Princess,” Yamaji called me. He ignored me, still fawning over Erika, stood, and knocked on the wooden door. “Doc, thanks for making time.”

I gulped and repeated weakly, “Thanks for seeing us.”

The aroma of coffee grew more intense right as the office door cracked open. The room behind the door was decorated in a monochrome style, and was almost obnoxiously well put together. A black bookshelf

contained documents and dense-looking academic tomes. On top of the shelf was an SLR camera and lens, maybe one of his hobbies, and a silver puzzle of some sort. He had a coffee mill and bottles filled with coffee beans in here, too.

On the other side of the black desk sat the one and only Dr. Higano. I could feel the anticipation building in my chest.

My stomach felt tight and I blurted out, “Ah.”

The man sat in an Aeron office chair manipulating a glass cube puzzle. He was unlike anyone I’d ever seen before. He was so tall and slender it seemed like he might snap in half, and he had ghostly white skin. But he gave off a sense of vitality rather than of weakness. He was like a reed made of steel. He wore an Armani suit underneath his white doctor’s coat. It looked like he’d been born in that outfit.

Blue irises filled the center of his narrow eyes, and he had a handsome face with a well-defined nose, but his face was bereft of emotion or warmth. It was all intense pressure.

Nevertheless, there was nothing uncomfortable or off-putting about him. He was cold enough that you could’ve convinced me he was an android, but he also made me feel strangely at ease.

Dr. Higano set down the glass cube puzzle with his long, bony fingers, and raised his shoulders as though taken off guard. He narrowed his eyes, looked at me with a glance as sharp as an icepick, and then said, “Beautiful.”

My entire body went numb.

“Your right hand,” he said. “It’s absolutely stunning.”

“Ah.” I instinctively hid my hand behind my back. I was embarrassed and unable to stay composed when it came to physical attraction.

It was pretty natural to get flustered when a man as attractive as Dr. Higano called you beautiful.

But why was I so worked up? I felt like it had to be more than just that.

I kind of felt like he'd *targeted* me or something. And not in the normal way that you'd target someone romantically.

"Come on, Doc," Yamaji interrupted. "Stop teasing the help. Princess here hasn't had a boyfriend yet. She might trip and fall for you."

"You have n-no idea whether I've had a boyfriend or not!"

"C'mon now," Yamaji said. "Don't underestimate the deductive powers of a veteran law enforcement officer." He made a camera with his fingers and thumbs and directed it at me. "Hmm. Judging from the steam rising off of your body...I've got it—you've never even been with a man!"

"I could write you up for sexual harassment!" I almost shrieked. Yamaji was such a crude old man.

Dr. Higano smiled with just the edges of his mouth and ignored our exchange. "Now then," he broke in, standing and reaching his hand out to me. "I'm Dr. Seiren Higano, psychiatrist and part-time detective."

I struggled valiantly to hide my embarrassment and timidly returned his handshake. "I'm Sergeant Yuri Uguisu, with the Tokyo Bay 1st Investigative Unit."

I'd only intended to give his hand a gentle shake, but Dr. Higano firmly grasped my hand with both of his like he was trying to memorize its shape.

"Not much flesh on your hand," he observed. "Very thin. The hand of a hard worker." My face reddened, a stark contrast with Dr. Higano's cold hands.

"You always give your job title when you introduce yourself," Yamaji said blandly. "That's a sign of a lack of confidence."

Yamaji's snide remark drained the blush from my face. His comment sobered me. He occasionally did come in handy.

"Well, maybe that's because I do lack confidence," I admitted. "Nobody looks at me and thinks 'She's a cop who investigates serial killers.'"

Dr. Higano released my hand and narrowed his eyes, looking

fascinated. “You do take pride in the work you do, correct?”

“Yes. I take pride in it,” I answered immediately. There was no confusion there.

Or rather, I had no confusion in providing that response.

“That’s enough of an introduction for the rookie,” Yamaji said. “Sorry to get right to it, but we’re here for your advice, Doc. This morning we found a woman’s body with the face removed and left foot cut off. The name of the victim is Reina Myoko. Happens to be Princess here’s high school classmate, apparently. At this point, the suspects are the victim’s boyfriend, her fiancé, and her father, her only relative. That’s it. Now, the details of the case—“

“W-Wait a second, Yamaji!” I sputtered. “Giving out victim and suspects’ personal information is a total violation of confidentiality!”

“Don’t be such a hardass,” Yamaji said. “The brass already know.”

“Already know?” I paused. “Now that you mention it, Section Chief Otawara did seem to be really okay with us coming here...”

“I’m the only one that works with Doc, so you should be thanking me. *I* found him.”

“What?” I asked. “I just wanted to know why an officer who’s supposed to uphold the law would be bending the rules!”

Yamaji sighed resignedly. “I thought you’d say something like that. Look here, Princess. You’ll figure out soon enough that in this line of work you’ll never solve any real world crimes if your investigation is strictly by the books. Like the sting operation you were working on this morning. If you did one thing wrong, it’d be illegal, right?”

“What I was doing this morning and this here are...”

Totally different, I wanted to say. But I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Princess, what is your highest priority?” he asked.

“It’s...” I trailed off. Of course, I wanted to catch the serial killer Masquerade.

“You don’t have to say it,” Yamaji let me off. “For me, it’s all about justice. I want to catch the criminals that have taken over society and create a more peaceful, decent place, even if I make only a microscopic contribution. If I have to break a few rules to do that, then that’s the breaks. What do you think?”

If we could catch Masquerade by leaking details of the investigation to Dr. Higano, then I had no choice but to do so.

I’d taken a vow. There was nothing I wouldn’t sacrifice for that.

“You still don’t seem convinced.” Dr. Higano smiled.

“N-No, I’m fine.”

“I meant that you still don’t seem convinced you can trust my abilities as a detective. Would you say that’s the case? If only I could somehow convince you...Ah, yes. May I demonstrate for you my detective powers of deduction?”

“Your powers of deduction?”

Dr. Higano took the glass puzzle in his hands and pointed it toward me. Smaller versions of me were reflected in the transparent cubes.

“Hmm. Ah ha,” Dr. Higano mused, with little consideration. Then he became assertive. “You became a policewoman to take revenge on Masquerade.”

“What?!” My eyes bulged open. Yamaji must’ve said something to him beforehand, but when I looked at Yamaji he was shaking his head.

“In order to do so, you had to cut ties with a close friend. You live on your own, and you keep some distance from your family. Recently you’ve been suffering from headaches.”

I haven’t mentioned any of these things to anyone. Not even Yamaji. Dr. Higano was able to guess these simply by having me look at his puzzle.

“Is this some kind of joke?” I wanted to know. “Are you trying to say all of that was reflected inside your stupid puzzle?”

“Unlikely,” he grinned. “That would make me a fortune teller. I am a

psychiatrist, and a detective. I'll add that this is merely a glass puzzle, not a crystal ball." He set the puzzle on his desk.

"Then how?" I asked.

"It's quite simple. In the few minutes since you arrived, I observed you and was guided by logical inferences. Fortunately for me, they all seem to have hit the mark."

"There's no way you could get all that with just inferences..."

Dr. Higano saw me wrinkle my brow and crossed his arms. "I'll start with the easiest to explain. First, the reason I knew you're having headaches. You probably don't even realize it, but since you arrived you've ground your teeth a number of times. You seem to be constantly anxious. Your automatic nervous system must be thrown off. You're constantly in a state of being clenched, so your shoulders tighten up. Even now I can tell that the muscles between your head and shoulders are stiff. This can lead to headaches. You should make an effort to relax more in your day-to-day. I'd recommend drawing a bath with your favorite powder, having a warm soak in the tub, and then put on some relaxing music just before bed and light a pleasant-smelling candle."

"I feel like I'm getting a physical..."

"My apologies. I'm sort of a workaholic." He laughed for a second and then continued. "The other thing that I've noticed from observing you is the frequency of your double bind reactions."

"Double bind?"

"I mean the times when what you said didn't match your facial expression. Based on the timing of the double binds I could see, you haven't fully accepted the fact that you're an officer. However, you're trying to convince yourself that it's what you want and that you take pride in it."

I pursed my lips.

"This is what I've gathered from the tone of your voice, the way you dress, and your facial expressions. I'm sensing that you're very serious

and patient, but have a certain anxious sensitivity?”

“I’d agree, but...”

“This corresponds with the characteristics of someone with a type A personality.”

I frowned before I could stop myself. “I actually am type A, but...I’m sorry, Doctor Higano, I thought that blood type personality theory didn’t have any scientific basis? I heard that humans have such multifaceted personalities that we tend to think we fit whichever blood type people tell us we are.”

“That’s the Barnum effect. That’s how fortune tellers are able to do what they do.”

Here he was again with the technical terms.

“As you mentioned,” he continued, “there is no scientific basis for links between blood type and personality. However, there is a psychological phenomenon called labeling theory. When people are labeled, they have a tendency to go along with those labels. To give you a concrete example, if those with type A blood are told by those around them from a young age that they are very diligent, they themselves become convinced that’s the way they are, and they start to behave like someone who is type A. That’s what I mean.”

I could see where he was coming from. However, my blood type had nothing to do with his conclusion that I’d joined the police to get revenge.

“I can tell that you’re a pretty straightforward person. Can you deny the fact that you’ve been influenced by that label?”

“I think I have been influenced,” I admitted.

I’d been a so-called “good kid” for as long as I could remember.

Someone said I was “mature,” so I acted that way, and then someone would say I was “clever,” so I studied hard. That’s definitely how I was wired.

“After seeing how you behaved, your parents must’ve wanted you to be

more typically feminine, didn't they? But in reality, you are in some senses the exact opposite of traditionally feminine. You became a police officer who investigates brutal crimes. Judging from the frequency of your double binds, you're still resisting it yourself. For you to become an officer given those conditions, you had to have been incredibly motivated and determined. I can imagine how difficult it was to betray the expectations everyone had of you and how you must've consciously recalculated all the relationships you'd had up to that point. For you, Sergeant Uguisu, it was natural to think your circumstances compelled you to become an officer."

There was no way for me to respond. My mouth was strangely dry.

I mean, everything was spot on. And his logic was flawless. Hearing it put like that, no one would be surprised by how I turned out.

But this was impossible. I'd only just met Doctor Higano today for the first time.

"My deductions made it that far and then I got caught up on one thing: your name. Uguisu isn't a very commonplace surname. I remembered that Masquerade's first victim had the same surname. That's when the pieces started to fit together. I realized that being close with one of the victims might make a powerful motivation." Dr. Higano quickly moved the pieces of his glass puzzle. "It was an obvious conclusion to reach. Just as obvious an ending as death is for a murder victim." He put all the different aspects together and finally put them into words: "You joined the police to take revenge on Masquerade."

—

Nadeshiko Uguisu. My sister.

Nadeshiko was two years younger than me, but you never would've thought we were related. She was as bright as I was plain. Whatever she did had a halo about it, as though she were trying to share the light she was imbued with.

She was popular wherever she went, always at the center of attention.

Our family was not an exception to this. I often felt like Nadeshiko had the leading role and I was nothing more than a lucky actor who happened to have the same agent and got tossed into the same production.

That is, until my second year of high school, when Nadeshiko was murdered.

Her beautifully expressive face, which had flashed like a kaleidoscope, was cut off, and her porcelain white left hand was cut off by the wrist. Nadeshiko as a corpse was, surprisingly, just a dead person—it was still so strange to me. She wasn't a leading actor in another world. The world didn't end because of her death.

Only one family was destroyed.

Nadeshiko Uguisu's murder was Masquerade's first crime. Her case was rehashed in the media over and over and eventually kneaded into a caricature.

—

A photo of her was broadcast over and over on TV. In it, she had a sheepish grin and wore no makeup. She seemed to be asking the photographer to stop taking her picture. The photo was shared online and showed no sign of disappearing. There were some people who wanted to blame the victim for her own murder, so the baseless slander of my sister was endless.

Because the killer was so famous, we, her relatives, weren't even able to forget the painful incident. Whenever we turned on the TV, whenever we got online, we often found ourselves ambushed by her death as it was shoved in our faces. We were left injured, emotionally wounded, like bystanders killed by a samurai randomly testing a new blade.

When I decided to become a policewoman, everyone around me tried to persuade me against it. They argued things like:

“Best just forget about it.”

“You should stay on your own path.”

“Revenge isn’t the solution.”

I understood what they were trying to say. I knew that they meant well. I might have even given similar advice to someone else in my shoes.

But it had happened to me.

Don’t pretend that you understand.

I’d been robbed of any path other than the one I’d taken.

However—and others may not get what I’m saying here—it wasn’t like my world became a fiery landscape fueled only by my passion for revenge just because I became an officer. I lived my life as usual. I enjoyed what I could of the world each day.

I just couldn’t forget about what happened to Nadeshiko. I was constantly praying. Praying for a future in which Masquerade was caught and exposed as the stale, diminutive, cowardly criminal he was so that the world would lose interest and we could, finally, quietly bury my sister’s death.

—

Yamaji gave a dry clap of his hands. I returned to my senses.

“Impressive, Doc,” Yamaji said. “I think even Princess will welcome you to the case after that performance.”

I gripped my wallet; it never left my side. When I thought of the photo inside, I was filled with hatred for her murderer.

Yamaji had been right. I did want to catch my classmate’s killer as quickly as possible.

“Dr. Higano,” I said. “We’d appreciate your help with the investigation.”

If asking for his help meant breaking the law, I didn’t know whether it was the right thing to do.

But at this point all I could do was bow and ask for his help.

“Alrighty,” Yamaji said brightly. “That settles things. We’ll tell you everything we know so far.”

After Dr. Higano finished listening to everything we'd established, such as the alibis of everyone involved, he took his glass cube puzzle in his hands again and slowly started to rotate it. After a few rotations, he suddenly stopped and crossed his arms with the puzzle still in one hand.

"I may have enough material." He relaxed his jaw. "Yamaji, I'll need your help with the arrangements. Can you get all three of them together in the same place quickly?"

"Just like always, Doc. I thought you'd say that, so I already asked my guys to take them in at eight and put them in interrogation rooms at the station."

"Impressive as always, Yamaji. Well done."

I listened to their exchange in a daze. I mean, they made it seem like they already had the killer in their sights.

But then I saw Yamaji put another lollipop in his mouth with a look of relief and I understood.

He *did* think he had him. Dr. Higano took this perplexing case from us the second it got difficult for Yamaji and me and solved it based on the background info alone.

I shook my head before I realized it. "No, no," I said. "That's impossible! You haven't even seen the crime scene, Dr. Higano! No matter how good you are, you have to admit it's way too soon to make any conclusions, right?"

"Perhaps," he replied humbly, but in his eyes I could see that his confidence was unwavering.

"You don't get it," I protested. "Reina Myoko was a special person, she's not just some victim."

"No, I do get it. Strange though it may be, she was not just a victim; she may have been the killer." The way he said this made it difficult to tell whether he was joking or not. Then he smiled at me.

Yamaji saw that I was getting flustered and came up behind me and

patted me gently on the back. It was as though he were trying to say, I know how you feel but try to understand.

“So, Doc, off to the station?” Yamaji prompted.

“Yes. But before that, there’s something I’m very interested to ask you, Yuri.” Dr. Higano pointed his narrow eyes right at me. “Who do *you* think is the killer?”

“What?” I said, confused.

Yamaji looked at me and slowly shook his stubbled face. “Do we really need her input, Doc? She’s basically an amateur with a badge.”

“She’s by no means an amateur. When someone is completely obsessed with a single thing, I’m quite interested to hear what they have to say.”

I’d been left hanging out to dry, and now he was looking out for me? But Doctor Higano’s eyes were serious. He really thought I’d be a useful resource.

The look on his face demanded a serious response, even if I ended up saying something ridiculous.

“I...”

There were other people with motives in this case. The methods didn’t have the same panache as *Masquerade*. The killer didn’t take the severed body part with him. And the victim herself was so mysterious.

However, that didn’t change my theory.

“I think *Masquerade* is the killer.”

I’d planned to keep quiet about my theory until we had enough evidence so I wouldn’t get laughed off the case. But faced with the earnestness in Dr. Higano’s eyes, I told him what I was really thinking.

“Princess, Princess,” Yamaji intervened. “There’s no fucking way it’s him. I told you, if you can’t look at things objectively, then you should piss off. Are you paying attention at all?”

Unsurprisingly, he looked incredulous and started scratching his head.

However, the serious look on Dr. Higano's face didn't shift. His eyes seemed to be flashing even more intensely.

"Yuri," he said. "There's evidence disproving the theory that Masquerade committed this crime. It may not be definitive, but surely you'd agree it exists, right?"

"Yes."

"Yet you still insist it was Masquerade. Are you suggesting you have evidence that would discredit the material we already have?"

"That...I don't have."

Yamaji shook his head in frustration with the lollipop hanging out of his mouth.

"I want to take on one of Masquerade's crimes. I'm well aware that I have bias. But I'm not playing fast and loose. I don't have any evidence, but I do have a reason."

"I want to hear it," Dr. Higano encouraged me.

"I considered the theory that Masquerade committed this crime...and came to this conclusion: it's incredibly convenient for Masquerade that Reina Myoko happened to be the victim."

Yamaji still had a harsh look on his face. "What the hell was convenient? I've got no idea what you're talking about."

"It's...a little difficult to explain it all..."

"Do you mean that her feet were very beautiful?" Dr. Higano said.

"That's my premise. But there's more than that..."

I began to lose confidence as I spoke. I started to realize exactly how baseless my theory was.

"Doc," Yamaji said. "I don't think we have to take Princess's advice here seriously, do we? She's got too many things clouding her thinking."

"We do, Yamaji. Masquerade is infamous. I'd like to hunt him down as well. And no one wants to catch him more than Yuri. Even if her

obsession produces ideas that are theoretically off the mark, they still have value as a reference.”

“So that’s what you’re up to.” Yamaji scratched his jaw.

“But our appointment with the three people of interest is approaching. Let’s talk more about your theory on the way to the station. Yuri, my apologies for making our talk secondary, but would you be okay with this?”

“Yes, of course.”

Before I even finished speaking, Dr. Higano drained the remainder of his coffee, tucked his tablet computer under his arm, and stood up. It was a single, nonchalant gesture, but it was so refined that I couldn’t resist watching him in fascination.

“Um, Dr. Higano...Can I ask something?”

His movements were so elegant that it felt like a crime to interrupt him.

But I had to ask him.

“Have you already identified a suspect?”

Dr. Higano answered without looking at me. “Yes. I’m going to pin it on her father.”

Naturally, I was taken aback by how summarily he rendered this verdict.

Dr. Higano winked to clear things up for me: “That was a joke.”

“What a cute car!” Erika squealed.

“You’ve got great taste, Erika,” Yamaji beamed. “Some young lady once called it a P.O.S., but I like what I like. It’s not *used*, it’s *vintage*.”

God, I wished he would stop flirting with her. She wasn’t being serious. There’s no way a flashy woman like her could appreciate the finer points of this supposed vintage car with its loud engine and air conditioner that only pumped out stale, warm air.

I looked at Dr. Higano, in the back seat on the passenger side. The “Doc” didn’t really match the jalopy, which seemed like it might disintegrate at any moment.

But even if it didn’t suit him, he was supposed to be there.

“So...Why is Erika with us?” I asked.

Erika was sitting shotgun and adjusting her bangs in the side mirror. She turned to look at me sitting in the back seat on the driver’s side and smiled. “I’ve got three people stalking me right now,” she said.

“What?”

“So it’s dangerous for me to walk alone. Plus, my place is in the same direction.”

Three was a pretty impressive number of stalkers—but she seemed like someone who might actually be able to pull that off.

Whether she was lying or not, her presence posed a problem.

“There are certain things related to the investigation that we won’t be able to talk about,” I complained.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I heard everything from the waiting room.”

Everything was definitely not okay. It was basically all classified information.

“This is probably far enough, would you mind getting out?” I suggested.

“What? No way! I mean, wouldn’t it be dangerous to leave Dr. Higano alone with a woman?”

She was unbelievable...Dr. Higano was right there, but she was still openly buttering him up. And her comment ignored Yamaji’s existence altogether.

“It’s okay, Yuri,” Dr. Higano assured me. “She knows how to keep a secret, despite how she may appear. She also happens to be very clever and has excellent intuition...Ah, my apologies, it was rude of me to mention your looks.”

“Oh, Dr. Higano. Thank you. I love you.”

“Thank you,” he replied.

Judging from Dr. Higano’s quick thank you, they seemed to both be quite used to displays of affection.

This only reconfirmed that these two were living in a different dimension than the one I was in.

“Yuri, why don’t we pick up where we left off?” Dr. Higano continued. “About Masquerade. The serial killer. First, we should look at the definition of serial killer, which I think we can safely say has nothing to do with the victim-offender relationship, correct? By this I mean that serial killings are multiple, consecutive killings in which the killer isn’t acquainted with the people he targets. According to profiling theories developed by former FBI Special Agent Robert K. Ressler, serial killers can be loosely divided into two types: organized and disorganized. The characteristics of these two types are—”

“I’ve studied that,” I interrupted. “Masquerade would be classified as an organized serial killer. One characteristic of organized serial killers is that they target strangers. Organized serial killers are generally intellectually average or above average, have a stable outward appearance, and are employed in a job that requires a certain level of proficiency. There are many cases where they even have girlfriends or wives. Naturally, I think

Masquerade is one of those cases.”

“Yes, I’m of the same opinion,” Dr. Higano said.

“However, I don’t think that analyzing Masquerade with current profiling theories is meaningful.”

Dr. Higano raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Why not?”

“Both organized and disorganized serial killers are motivated by sexual desire. Even the serial killers who helped coin the phrase ‘serial killer’ were motivated by sex. Like Ted Bundy, the representative example of an organized serial killer, or Ed Gain, who fashioned dead bodies into clothes, utensils, and furniture and was the model for Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*. In Japan, Seito Sakakibara’s murders of two school children in Kobe were also based on sexual desire. But I don’t think this is the case for Masquerade. His motivation is different from the main premise of profiling theory, so I don’t think it applies here.”

Yamaji was still sucking on his candy and cut in. “Princess, you do realize Masquerade has only targeted beautiful people, right? *And* he’s got some fetish for taking their most beautiful body parts with him. To me, that’s a clear sign of sexual deviance.”

“Um, can I say something?” Shirasu interrupted. She pressed one finger up against her lips cutely. “To be honest, I feel the same as you, Yuri-chan. People generally only fall for one type of person, don’t you think? But for Masquerade, his victims are all different sorts of women. It kind of feels like a music producer casting as many different types of cute girls for a supergroup so that they can attract as many different fans as possible.”

She had a funny way of putting it, but on this point, we did agree.

And was she seriously calling me “Yuri-chan”? When did we become BFFs?

“Maybe he just appreciates many types of women? To be honest, I wouldn’t mind if he killed a hottie from a strip club next time,” Yamaji joked.

Yamaji was the absolute worst. I wanted him to die already.

Dr. Higano completely ignored the crass remark and continued, “Even if Erika is right, I don’t think we can rule out Masquerade’s sexual desire. I say this because when you take into account the fact that he takes body parts, he does have the quality of a collector. Perhaps he’s sexually satisfied by attacking many different women rather than targeting one similar type.”

“Masquerade as a collector is the first theory that comes to mind when considering his methods...” I said. “But could I finish elaborating on my thoughts about the case?”

“Of course. I’d like to know more.”

I nodded. “Up until now, there have been seven Masquerade victims total. All of them beautiful women. Partially because of that, whenever he kills one, it riles up the public and monopolizes the media conversation. However, no matter how many permutations he comes up with and no matter how brutal the killings are, they gradually start to lose their novelty.”

“People still do get pretty worked up over it I guess,” Yamaji said. “But there is a slight sense of ‘This again.’”

I nodded to acknowledge him and continued, “But then we come to Reina Myoko. She wasn’t just beautiful, she was also incredibly enigmatic. She was mysterious even in high school, and one of her mysteries is why she refused to leave behind any photos of herself. It’s also strange that she owned a luxury car but didn’t have a driver’s license. All this has riled up my suspicions and made me think about new possibilities. Dr. Higano has suggested Masquerade was a collector, that the act of killing a new, different kind of woman satisfied him sexually. However, I find it more convincing that—” I paused for a beat. “—he was biding his time and finding the victim who’d have the biggest splash with the public. What do you think?”

There probably would’ve been plenty of splash if he’d kept killing the same kind of woman over and over again. But I felt like Masquerade’s

methods hooked the public, providing endless opportunities for discussion—What kind of hot chick would he pick next? Which body part would he take with him?

Not to mention the fact that Reina Myoko was his latest victim?

The world would find out quickly how different she was from the others, and it would pique their interest.

I thought Masquerade must be going for that effect.

Dr. Higano covered his eyes and nodded deeply. “I see,” he said. “So this is connected to your previous comment—that Reina would have been a convenient victim for Masquerade? Masquerade is selecting and killing remarkable individuals as the world desires.”

“Exactly. This is why Masquerade differs from a traditional serial killer who operates on sexual desire. He almost seems like an intellectual who’s totally lost it, who’s making decisions based solely on how he can most influence society rather than any personal desires. He’s basically a terrorist at his purest essence. At least that’s what I think.”

Dr. Higano re-opened his eyes, impressed. “Brilliant. No one has suggested that he’s a terrorist before. Incredibly interesting theory. However, and I don’t mean to quibble, but what do you think he’s trying to accomplish by killing these beautiful women? Killing women on Odaiba without getting caught is far more difficult than setting off a bomb in a crowded area. If he’s operating out of political beliefs, his approach is the highest risk, smallest reward.”

He had a point.

“Ooh ooh, let me!” From shotgun, Erika’s hand shot up in high spirits. “I just realized something. Okay, so, I really don’t think such a weird guy who kills people is acting based on his political beliefs.”

“But then you do agree with me that he’s operating out of sexual desire?” Dr. Higano asked.

“Maybe he’s something like an athlete?” she countered.

I furrowed my brow with confusion.

“Yuri, you’re making a super serious face right now,” she remarked. “But I swear I have a point. Like, there are people who can run the 100-meter dash in under eight seconds, right? That’s amazing, but it’s not super helpful around the house. But they’re so talented they could win a gold medal and their name would go down in history, and that alone gets them to train like crazy. See?”

“So what you’re trying to say then,” I murmured, summarizing her main point, “is that he kills people *because* he’s good at killing people.”

What was going on? Her logic was, to be perfectly honest, ridiculous.

But I had to admit it made some sense.

Say Masquerade’s crimes were, as I thought, a sort of terrorism. As Dr. Higano said, a terrorist wouldn’t normally choose Masquerade’s methods of murder.

However, if he’d chosen to kill in this way because of his *talents* as a killer, that would solve the mystery. He was such a skilled killer that there would be nothing preventing him from putting it into action.

“I’m...not so sure,” I hesitated.

The logic remained ridiculous.

We’d never understand Masquerade’s intentions from conjecture alone.

Dr. Higano saw me frown and smiled encouragingly. “Whatever the case, we can’t let ourselves get down. A criminal who keeps killing so recklessly will eventually be caught. No matter how good a serial killer he is. That much I’m sure of. And I think the one to catch him will be someone like you, who’s completely obsessed with him.”

Yamaji stepped on the brake. I looked out the window of the slowing vehicle and saw the familiar concrete walls of the Patchwork Fortress.

“Here we go,” Yamaji said and crunched his lollipop. “That’s all the time we have for your deduction dreams right now, Princess. Time to solve the case that’s right in front of our noses. One step at a time, that’s the way to

get to Masquerade.”

“Got it!” I said, trying to pump myself up.

For now, I decided to forget the fact that Masquerade might be related to the Reina Myoko case. I needed to investigate without anything clouding my mind.

I had to focus on solving the riddle of my mysterious classmate.

Yamaji’s vintage Toyota Crown threaded through the opening in the rugged gate and pulled into the parking lot. I unbuckled my seatbelt and opened the door, and Dr. Higano followed me out in his white coat.

I paused. “You’re bringing that thing with you?”

Dr. Higano had his glass puzzle cube in one hand. “Yes, I find it easier to think if I have something to do with my hands. And I guess it’s also a kind of superstition. I’ve solved a number of cases fairly quickly when I have it with me.”

He spun the cubes in his long, bony fingers. For some reason the smooth movements of his fingers were captivating.

“Shall we?” Dr. Higano said. Strangely, he smiled brightly, like a blossoming flower. “Let’s pull this case apart, and expose it for what it is.”

6

“Photos? It’s like I told you already, lady. I don’t have any of us...and yeah, I realize that’s not exactly normal for people who are dating, but it is what it is.”

—

“Photos of Reina? Now that you mention it, I don’t think I have any...not a single one.”

—

“Photographs of Reina? I don’t have any. I think she might’ve thrown them all out during the crazy point in time when we were selling our house. She was a third-year in high school. She had some kind of hangup about them I think, never took any after that. So I don’t have any. Ah...now that I think about it, what are we going to use for a funeral portrait?”

—

8:00 P.M. Erika immediately left for home as though she’d just finished some tiresome errand. The rest of us stepped through the automatic front door into Building Three.

Tokyo Bay Station Building Three was a relatively new building that was only about ten years old. However, the wanted posters and miscellany pinned on top of each other, the overflowing piles of documents behind the reception desk, and the large, fist-shaped hole in a partition from some unknown person gave the place a worn-in feel, like the building itself had taken on the character of the officers within.

Naturally, it had the tense, anxiety-inducing atmosphere typical of police stations, and the houseplants and sad attempts at levity did nothing to break up that threatening air.

The three men we’d asked to come in voluntarily as witnesses, and the officer watching them, stood in front of the blue lamp that read

“Reception.”

Shota Akiyama, Reina’s self-proclaimed boyfriend. 25 years old.

Ken Nakahigashi, Reina’s fiancé. 27 years old.

Koichiro Myoko, Reina’s father. 57 years old.

Nakahigashi was R&D Director at the Yokohama branch of Central Construction, a major general contracting company. He was the the third son of Heiji Nakahigashi, president of Central Construction, and thus a candidate to be the next president of the company.

Nakahigashi was wearing rimless glasses on his pale, white face, which seemed untouched by the sun. He was short and skinny and was wearing an expensive-looking suit. Something about him reminded me of bank workers from back in the day. He appeared calm, but I saw his eyes darting about and could tell he was nervous about the questioning that was about to start.

I looked to his left.

Koichiro Myoko. He was an independent member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly, and also Reina’s father.

He was only 57, but the streaks of gray in his hair and deep wrinkles that cut into his face made him seem older. He gave the impression of being unconfident and unreliable. He seemed more like a small shop owner than a politician. I didn’t feel any of the sense of mystery Reina had. The color of his face was awful and he was acting strangely, constantly wiping the sweat away from his face with a green handkerchief, the opposite of Nakahigashi.

All three had been very close with Reina.

Which is why we’d asked them for any photos they had for her. But unbelievably, none of them had even a single one.

The fact that not even her own father had any was a sign of how obsessive she was about never having her picture taken.

“So it’s like, I can refuse to answer, right?” Shota Akiyama barked at

Yamaji angrily. “Just let me go home, all right? You’re treating me like a criminal, man. This sucks.”

“It’s voluntary, so legally speaking you can,” I told him. “But you came all the way out here, you should help us out. Don’t you want to find the killer?”

“I’m not worried about it. It was this guy.” He gestured to Ken Nakahigashi with a movement of his jaw.

Nakahigashi sighed openly. “Harsh words, but empty. I wish you’d stop letting your emotions get in the way of your thinking.”

“Lady,” Akiyama blustered. “This guy is messed up. Reina got murdered, and I just heard him fucking *blame* her for dying at an inconvenient time.”

Nakahigashi furrowed his brow and shook his head wildly as if to suggest the idea was ridiculous. “I did *not* say that. He doesn’t like me, so he’s twisting my words. Stop trying to trick them. I just meant that I’m only being considered a suspect because of my connection to Reina.”

“What?” Akiyama cried. “That’s the same damn thing! You’re not even sad she died! *That’s* what I hate the most about you!”

“I *am* sad. I just think there’s more to sadness than openly performing your emotions like you.”

I thought what Nakahigashi said was reasonable. But I didn’t get the sense that he was really all that torn up either, from the cold expression on his face.

Koichiro Myoko stepped between the two of them, looking bewildered. “Stop the bickering,” he chided. “You’ve both lost someone important.”

But Akiyama didn’t flinch. He raised his eyebrows and got angrier. “You know you’re a suspect, too, right? Are you seriously shaking just because the cops called you in? You must have some serious skeletons in your closet.”

“That’s n-not the case...”

Akiyama noticed that Koichiro Myoko was at a loss for words, which emboldened him to escalate the conversation. “I mean, you *knew* Reina loved me, and you still pressed her to marry this guy? You were just putting her out there in a marriage of convenience for your own gain. I’ll never trust anyone who’d use her like that!”

It was impossible to misinterpret Akiyama’s accusation. His innocent-looking face had turned bright red with anger.

“Wh-What are you talking about?” Myoko said. “Y-You’re the one who —”

“Shut up!”

Unwilling to put up with this ugly shouting match any further, I raised my voice. “Shota, this isn’t the time or place to vent! You don’t care about finding Reina’s killer? We have to combine all of our abilities to find him! Your account is critical!”

Akiyama finally looked embarrassed and seemed to understand how serious the situation was. The other two also quieted meekly.

Dr. Higano, perhaps sensing I was a little embarrassed, too, after my shouting, stepped out in front of the three men. “That reminds me,” he asked them, “have you all seen the victim’s body?”

They all nodded.

“I realize this is a strange question, but was it definitely Reina’s body?”

Nakahigashi frowned. “It was...What exactly are you trying to say?”

Koichiro Myoko nodded, confused. “That’s my daughter. A father would know, even without her face.”

“Yes, we understand,” Dr. Higano said.

Right then, Kondo, also with the 1st Investigative Unit, called over to us, “Yamaji, do you have a sec?”

Kondo had athletic, shortly trimmed hair, a tanned face, and sharp eyes. He was 27, three years older than me, and popular among women officers, perhaps because he was the perfect age. But he wasn’t my type at

all.

“Over here,” he called, leading us out into the empty hallway.

Dr. Higano came out so naturally, it was as though he was part of the team. I looked at Yamaji to see whether this was appropriate, but he didn't seem to care.

Even though we were about to discuss topics that no one outside the unit should've had access to, both Yamaji and Kondo included Dr. Higano as though he'd always been there. That's how much they trusted him.

Kondo put a hand over his mouth and spoke softly. “I think you can probably disregard this, but we had an eyewitness come forward.”

“A witness?” Yamaji asked. “Who?”

“Yeah, about that...” Kondo scratched at his head sheepishly. “The witness said, ‘I saw Reina Myoko today.’”

Yamaji grimaced after hearing this impossible news. “How did this tip get to us in the first place? We only told the media that there'd been a murder. We've kept a lid on everything else.”

“So, uh, one of Reina's coworkers provided the tip.”

“A coworker?”

“I sent you an email,” Kondo said. “Did you read it yet? Reina Myoko had a position at Melto Crown Entertainment, a Hong Kong-based casino operator. I knew you didn't have a photo yet, so I asked about it, and the photo that should've been attached to her resume was gone, apparently.”

Again there was no photo. Reina was incredibly thorough about leaving no evidence of what she looked like.

“Rumors that she's dead are already spreading around her office,” Kondo continued. “So the witness, a woman she worked with, decided to contact us...apparently.”

“This coworker must've known her pretty damn well. You think she's somehow mistaken?”

“Maybe so. On the phone she was so scared it sounded like she’d seen a ghost.”

Yamaji scratched at his stubble. “Ok, I’ll bite...Where’d she see her?”

“At the foot of the Sky Tree, around Oshiage. She said she saw her riding in the passenger seat of a red car, a foreign model. She didn’t get the license plate.”

That was close to Reina’s apartment.

“You sure she didn’t just see a similar-looking woman in a red foreign car and mistake her for Reina?”

“No, I thought that as well and brought it up, but the witness didn’t know Reina owned a red BMW. She didn’t even know she owned a foreign car. After following up about the details, it sounds like she definitely saw Reina’s particular BMW.”

Reina’s BMW was gone from her parking lot and hadn’t been found yet. But today someone who looked like Reina was riding shotgun in the car?

I wondered whether it really was *just* a look-a-like.

“Damn,” Yamaji said. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested, but...It’s gotta be a case of mistaken identity.”

“Yeah...” Kondo sighed quietly and scratched his head.

Yamaji’s conclusion was common sense. Kondo seemed to realize this is the conclusion he’d come to.

But I didn’t agree.

Dental records had shown that the body was Reina Myoko. Her father, Koichiro, had also said it was definitely his daughter. That I was well aware of.

Yet I couldn’t help but feel that Reina Myoko was still with us.

However, there was no way I could actually utter such an insane idea. I tried to stuff this feeling away.

“Do you mind, Yamaji?” Dr. Higano asked. He had a serious look on his

face and was spinning his finger puzzle. “I think this is an important hint that sheds light on the entire case. It may have something to do with Reina’s secret.”

Yamaji took a fresh lollipop and drummed it against his head. “Sorry, Doc. Someone saw someone else who looks like Reina after she died, and there’s nothing we can do about it. We just don’t have an investigator to spare. There’s nothing we can do.”

“Ah, I see...I guess it can’t be helped. Just, please remember I was very curious about this detail.”

“Yeah, got it.” Yamaji nodded, ended the conversation, and went back to the three men.

“Hmm...” Dr. Higano stopped spinning his puzzle and was still furrowing his brow.

What if Dr. Higano, like me, sensed that she still existed?

The doctor realized I was looking at him. I smiled in an effort to prevent myself from looking away.

“Yuri,” he said and suddenly came right up to me. Then, like he was sharing something terrible, some unspeakable secret, he whispered, “Do you think Reina Myoko might have come back to life?”

Obviously, Dr. Higano didn't actually believe people could come back to life. He'd said that to show exactly how little he knew about Reina Myoko.

We took the three men to Interrogation Room Six. Yamaji took into account that it was already well past 8:00 P.M. and set a 30-minute time limit for the questioning. In exchange, we had all three agree to additional questioning for the next day if we determined their testimony wasn't enough. We'd already made reservations at a business hotel that worked with Tokyo Bay Station. This was also so we wouldn't lose track of someone if we found them suspicious.

At any rate, I wanted to run the interrogation as efficiently as possible, because we just didn't have any time. Even if Masquerade wasn't involved, we were still looking at a brutal murder, and the National Police Agency would soon be calling for an investigative task force. Yamaji and I had jurisdiction, but if a task force was opened we—and Tokyo Bay Station as a whole—would lose our ability to operate as freely. Having Dr. Higano join us in the interrogation room, for instance, would be totally out of the question.

In order to expedite the process, we had them write down critical information and decided what we would ask them beforehand.

We were going to ask about these five topics during that half hour:

1. Personality profile
2. Alibi
3. Relationship with the victim (Reina Myoko)
4. Their impression of the victim
5. Whether they had any idea who the killer was

We used Interrogation Room Six when we wanted to proceed with extreme caution and not put pressure on suspects. It was a room with a large window looking out over the water and the gaudy Odaiba hotels.

Inside, house plants were positioned next to the curtains, and there was a white, single-seat sofa with cushions.

I took a position at the desk near the entrance and listened to the questioning. Yamaji sat directly in front of the witness, and Dr. Higano stood next to him with his arms crossed. At the doctor's request, we received permission from the three witnesses to record the conversations on video.

First up was Ken Nakahigashi.

—

My name is Ken Nakahigashi. I'm 27 years old. I work at a construction company.

Hmm, my alibi from 7:11 to 7:48 P.M....I heard from another officer that that's the window when Shota got a call from Reina, went into her apartment, and then called the police. That's fine and all, but do you really believe everything he said? Oh, I shouldn't be worrying about that? I guess you're right.

I was in my office in Yokohama. Ask the other employees, they'll back me up.

What was I doing after eight? You're Mr. Higano, right? Reina's foot was in her place at that point, so wasn't she already dead? Why are you asking what I was doing then? Fine...I was working at the office until 12:30 that night. It should be printed on my time card, but from 10:30 onward I was by myself. I don't know what we have in the office, but I think I should be on security cameras leaving the office. If not, my alibi from 10:30 on may not be airtight.

I was Reina's fiancé. We were planning to get married in August. A marriage of convenience...I guess it's inevitable someone would say that. After all, my father is her father's benefactor. Koichiro is a politician, and when he failed at his business, he took out loans. My dad provided financial assistance in the form of large, unsecured loans. He wasn't stingy with his support when Koichiro was running for Metropolitan

Assembly either.

But I don't want you to get the wrong idea: Reina wasn't a hostage or anything. I'm going to be head of my company, and she was looking forward to marrying me. She wanted to be back in a family that was well off, like they'd been before.

Reina wasn't some delicate flower who hated marriages of convenience. I never even saw her express any emotions per se. She struck me as someone who lived her life based solely on a set of ethics. I never sensed any compassion from her either. I don't mean that out of any sense of animosity. I don't usually like emotional women. I was actually attracted to her logical side, which is one of the reasons I decided to marry her. My ideal marriage was one where we'd enjoy each other's strengths without interfering with each other.

Yeah...So it's a total surprise that she would date someone like Akiyama. He didn't really have anything going for him. He doesn't seem to have any money, and he's only average looking. Ha...Maybe the sex was really good. I'm not joking. Aside from pure physical pleasure, I can't think of a single reason she was spending time with him.

How would I describe Reina in a single word? Hmm...When I looked at Reina, I had the impression of a simple, unembellished work of art.

Yes...Reina was *beautiful*.

So maybe I'd say "ice sculpture"? Is that too poetic?

And the last question—do I have any idea who the killer is? None. None at all. Do I think it's Akiyama? I can't stand people who jump to conclusions. If I arbitrarily decided who the killer was based on just my emotions, I'd drop to his level.

I can imagine his motive. Reina broke up with him, and he was overcome with passion and killed her. However, although I can imagine that, I don't think he'd have the courage to do everything else, cutting off her foot and her face. So it's probably not him.

Ah, yes. I did see Reina that day...Yes, I told my coworkers that I'd be

meeting with her, so you should be able to confirm it pretty easily...No, I wasn't hiding it. I was just waiting to tell you.

I met with Reina to talk at a hotel café on Odaiba from 3:00 to 4:00. The name of the café is Sea's Ale...You think I didn't mention it because I didn't want to bring it up? Definitely not. It's just that we ended up getting into a fight at the café over something trivial. To be honest, I thought you might misinterpret things.

Marriage is a crossroads, and sometimes people might bump into each other. Don't you think?

What was that? Officer, did you say something? Could you repeat that?

"Did Reina limp or favor one of her legs?"

Not that I can remember. Why do you ask?

Hmm. I guess I remember that she had blisters on her heels and the skin would peel off.

Does that have something to do with her case?

Maybe or maybe not? No way, that's got nothing to do with this.

—

My name is Koichiro Myoko. I'm 57 and serve as a member of the Metropolitan Assembly.

I'm sorry, could I have some water? I'm parched...Yes, I know I need to relax a little.

So, my alibi from 7:11 to 7:48 P.M. I was campaigning outside Kokusai-Tenjijō Station from 6:30 to 8:00. Yeah, the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election is coming up soon.

After 8:00? After I finished the campaigning...I went back to my apartment and didn't go out again. That's right, I don't have an alibi for that time.

[Coughing.] Sorry, [coughing sounds], could I have some water? What? I know I don't look well. Yeah...I guess I'm still coming to terms with

Reina's death and also feeling pressured by this questioning. I'm a politician. I shouldn't be getting so flustered. This is really embarrassing...No, I don't need to take a break. Let's keep going.

My connection with Reina is that she was my daughter. Her mother, my wife Yumi, died when Reina was a middle school student.

Well, I guess that's around when my life started to go off the rails. My wife's death was such a shock. I was crushed for a long time. Even now I'm still on meds. I was weak and my company went under, and if it wasn't for Nakahigashi—ah, I mean, Ken's father Heiji—if it wasn't for his support, I don't know what would have happened. Yes, it was tough. I even thought about killing myself.

To be honest, ever since my wife died, I've just felt like, who cares? My head's foggy, and I always feel like I'm overlooking important things. I'm sorry to be such a downer, but now...I think it might have been easier if I'd died the same time she did. I was just starting to make the family finances better again, and Reina had just arranged a promising marriage. Right when there was finally some hope for the future, I lose another part of my family...I just can't do it anymore.

Or maybe I'm reaping what I sowed? Since the day my wife died, I haven't been able to deal with life, and maybe it was my weakness that somehow caused Reina's death?

You're right; I'm probably being too hard on myself. I guess I'm just kind of run down. But I don't need your thoughts and prayers. You should save those for my dead daughter, not me.

Now that I look back on it, Reina's life was rocky from start to finish.

Right after she was born, her biological mother abandoned her. She was one of those babies given up in a "baby hatch." As a couple, Yumi and I weren't physically able to have children, so we hoped to adopt. We met Reina when she was one. I immediately fell in love with how sweet she was. We filled out the paperwork right away and adopted her as our own.

They had a different name for Reina at the orphanage. Her parents apparently left a note with her name on it when they abandoned her. But

we thought it was sad to give her a name chosen by the people who left her behind, so we named her Reina.

What was her original name?...I can't remember anymore. I didn't really care.

Back then we were well off and incredibly pleased with Reina, and we were confident we could make her happy.

But we were getting ahead of ourselves. For some reason, terrible things just kept happening to her.

Once when she was five, Yumi took her eyes off of Reina for a second, and she disappeared. She was kidnapped for ransom. Fortunately that incident ended quickly without any harm to Reina, but I'm sure she was terrified.

I realize this now, but I think after that we were a little overprotective because of the kidnapping. We didn't let her go anywhere other than school and our house, not even to her friends' houses to play, until she got to middle school. Part of the reason we put her in Junseiwa Academy was that it was residential from junior high onward so someone would always be looking out for her.

But nowhere is ever safe. The spring of her second year in middle school, Reina's roommate cut her wrists and committed suicide. Apparently she'd been bullied by an older student. And it was Reina who discovered her body covered in blood...Ah, the teachers all told us there was no evidence Reina was involved in the bullying.

The summer of her third year in middle school, she saw her mother Yumi fall from a cliff in Portugal and die.

During her third year in high school, the construction company I was managing went under, and we started having financial trouble. I somehow got her through high school, but I couldn't afford tuition at Keiryoku University and she ended up having to drop out.

Pretty sad, don't you think? It's almost like she lived her life surrounded by misfortune.

After she left college, she left home, I think maybe because she was starting to consider her circumstances in life. She cut off contact with me for a while. I guess it was three years I didn't hear from her? Yes, of course I was worried, but I wanted her to be in a better situation, so I tried not to cry and let her do what she wanted...I have no idea what she was doing during that time.

She showed up in my life again when she was 21 and gave me her contact information. I was so happy. Then she was a totally different person. More grown up, far more radiant than she was before.

Not long after that I learned she was dating Ken and planned to marry him, although I have no idea where they met, Yes, that's right. I didn't introduce them. It was what Reina wanted. So it's really upsetting to hear it called a marriage of convenience.

Shota Akiyama? I only found out about him today...Yeah, I was surprised when he said he was her boyfriend. To be honest, I doubt they were really dating. This may be a little rude, but they don't really match.

What was Reina like? She was good at school, but aside from that she wasn't clever in a calculating way or anything. I think she was a little young for her age, probably because she was my only daughter and I spoiled her. She whined a lot, maybe because I was always so busy and she was trying to get my attention. So as you'd expect she was very genuine and gentle. Seen from afar, she might've looked like an incredibly blessed little girl.

I think it was probably inevitable for this to happen.

Anyway, this isn't something a father should normally say, but Reina was *beautiful*.

If you were to describe her in one word, that'd be it. She was Snow White.

What? There are discrepancies with what Ken said? Well, it's normal for someone to show a different side of themselves around their boyfriend than their parents.

Oh, it's not that? It's...Hmm, what is it then? I don't know.

Do I know who the killer is?

...

I don't. Not at all.

[Coughing sounds.] Excuse me, could I have some more water? Yeah, I don't feel so great.

The killer. If Shota was lying about being with Reina, then I think that's suspicious. That's the only thing I can think of.

—

I'm Shota Akiyama. 25 years old. Part-time worker.

Why am I the last to go? I'm ready to get out of here. No, I don't have anything special to do. I'm just in the mood to be by myself! My girlfriend is dead! Okay?!

Huh? Reina's dad didn't know about me? What a load of bull.

Nah. I don't want to admit it, but Reina probably wanted to hide me from her dad. But this wasn't unrequited love. Reina liked me, too. That I'm sure of.

Give me a second. I want to get my head straight.

Okay, I'm ready.

My alibi? I already told you. Do we really have to go over it? It's procedure? Whatever, then.

While I was at work, I got a call, so I went over to Reina's apartment. I rode my scooter straight to her apartment from the convenience store and went in with my copy of the key...Huh? No, I had no time to stop somewhere else. You can check if you don't believe me. You'll realize I'd never have made it on time if I didn't drive pretty fast.

So then I found her—[swallowing sound]—foot, reported it, and was with the police until early that morning. Then I just went back and forth from Reina's apartment to Mukojima Police Station. I was at Reina's

place with the cops until 8:00.

And that brings us to the next question: Our relationship. We were dating. It was the real thing, unlike that other guy. He was meaningless.

Where did I meet Reina?

Why does that matter? This whole thing is crap. We met through friends, ok?

What was she like?

She was amazing, very kind. She always thought about how her actions affected others. I guess she was somewhat of a martyr? That side of her was intense. She had more love than anyone I ever met. I always thought she should have prioritized herself more than she did.

I felt that love, too, of course. She changed me. I felt like I would have done *anything* for her.

If I had to wrap it all up in one word, I feel like she embodied “maternity.”

But you know, Reina Myoko was *beautiful* more than anything else.

Why are you making that face? Huh? The other two had a completely different impression of Reina?

If that’s the case, then maybe she was only showing her true self to me? Of course she’d never reveal herself to Ken, her fiancé of convenience, or to her dad who was making her marry him.

Yeah, that’s gotta be it! That’s why she didn’t tell her dad about me! I’m the only one—the only one she loved!

What? I am calm. I’m just stating the obvious.

Who’s the killer? I’ve told you over and over, it’s that fucking Ken guy. Doesn’t he seem like the kind of guy who’d be tricky enough to kill her and frame Masquerade?

What? Err, your name was Dr. Higano?

Excuse me? “What am I hiding?”

Nothing! What the hell are you talking about?!

I've already told you everything you wanted. So I can go home now, right? What? You want me to stay overnight in a hotel? You've gotta be fucking kidding me! Let me outta here! Shit...Is the hotel safe?

After the interviews, Yamaji decided we couldn't let any of them go. It was technically voluntary, so we couldn't force them to stay the night, but though Shota wanted to leave, we eventually managed to convince even him to stay.

Dr. Higano and I left Yamaji at the station to go over the interrogation report while we took the three of them to their rooms at the hotel. Dr. Higano seemed to have a few unanswered questions remaining, however, and went into Koichiro Myoko's room to talk with him a little.

I took the elevator to the hotel lobby and sat on a sofa. I would be in the lobby all night to stand guard for them.

I sighed and thought over the questioning.

All three of them seemed to be concealing something. None of them were completely unrelated to the death. We had to figure out what they were hiding and expose it.

I pulled at my hair...and caught myself. That's not what was bothering me.

I was frustrated by the lack of consistency between the Reina that each of them had described.

"Dammit!" I cursed to myself. "There are no photos? Why? It's impossible. Not even her father? Her fiancé? Her boyfriend? And then what was up with the way they were describing her? *Had they all really failed to understand her?*"

Ice Sculpture. Snow White. Maternity.

Everyone is complex, but there are limits. Their characterizations also differed greatly from the Reina I knew in high school.

It was all ridiculous. Impossible.

Something was clearly off.

“I understand how you’re feeling,” Dr. Higano sympathized with me when he returned to the lobby. “But just relax.”

“But Doctor—”

“If you’re too worked up, your best ideas won’t come to you,” he warned, and rubbed my back gently. Naturally, that did nothing to calm me down and only heightened the tension in my whole body.

“D-Did you finish talking with Koichiro?” I asked.

Dr. Higano ignored my stammer and sat on the sofa. “Yes, I just wanted to ask about his relationship with Reina once more. But you’re right to be feeling frustrated. We would’ve been in a serious bind if what they said about Reina had been more disjointed. The one consistency was that she was ‘beautiful.’ This whole thing is starting to turn into a nightmare. It’s even made me ask this question.” Dr. Higano paused. “Did Reina Myoko really exist in the first place?”

Exactly.

It seemed like each of them had seen their own convenient illusion of her.

If no one had been actually interested in her as a person, then it wouldn’t have been an issue. However, it wasn’t just Ken Nakahigashi—Koichiro Myoko’s feelings for his daughter and Shota Akiyama’s love for his girlfriend were unmistakably genuine. They didn’t seem to be lying about her either.

But someone *was* lying. For instance, if there was a beautiful flower in a vase, then everyone would be paying attention to the beautiful flower. But if the vase was full of muddy water?

The person lying had to be *Reina*, the victim herself.

I was sure of it. Unless we investigated Reina herself, we’d never understand the entirety of the case. That wouldn’t change even if we assumed this was a Masquerade killing.

And of everyone currently working on the case, who was most suited to

investigate Reina in greater detail? It was without a doubt me, her classmate.

I had to find out more about Reina.

“Yes!” I told myself, reinvigorated. I knew who I should contact immediately.

Otoha Tamachi, Miyuki Yata, Sena Hagawa, Asami Ino, and Ryoko Omura. The “Bumblebees” who all had had close connections with Reina.

They might know exactly what it was Reina was making such an effort to hide.

“Yuri Uguisu? Oh, right, we were classmates. It’s been a while. I assume from the timing that you must be getting in touch about Reina, right?”

I’d cut off contact with all my high school friends, so I was anxious about interacting with the Bumblebees, but Dr. Higano had given me the perfect advice.

If rumors were already spreading about Reina’s death at her workplace, wouldn’t my classmates be hearing the same rumors? And if that was the case, wouldn’t at least one of them try to verify what they had heard with the police? Dr. Higano’s prediction was right on.

Luckily for us, we learned that Otoha Tamachi, one of the Bumblebees, had gotten in touch with the police. Even better, she’d been proactive about wanting to know details of the incident and had left her contact information.

Fortunately, when I called her number, she picked up and we had a short exchange.

When I told her I was currently a police officer and that I happened to be investigating Reina’s case, she grew excited and rambled on asking for specific information about the incident.

I couldn’t leave the hotel, and considering how late it was, I thought I’d try to handle everything over the phone, but Dr. Higano stopped me.

“In order to understand this case as a whole, I think I need to understand Reina,” he said.

I agreed with him.

“Otoha may be our best chance to understand Reina on a deeper level,” he said. “We shouldn’t question her over the phone. We need to look her squarely in the face and hear what she has to say.”

I couldn’t refuse after he was so insistent.

And so though it was late, almost midnight, when I asked Otoha if she could meet right away, she agreed.

She said she was at her family home in Seijo. I asked if it was possible for her to come to the hotel, and she said she'd be there in around an hour if the Shuto Expressway didn't have too much traffic.

Then I ended the call and let out a long sigh.

When I looked at Dr. Higano, he had an unusually serious look on his face, like he thought this aspect of the case was extremely important.

"Was there anyone else other than Otoha Tamachi she was close with?" he asked.

"Yes, she had a group of girlfriends called the Bumblebees who acted kind of like her bodyguards."

"Really? Can we look into them in the police database?"

"If they have priors we'd be able to find their fingerprints, but...I'd keep my expectations low. I think we can find where they live and whether they have a driver's license or not. Not exactly useful information."

"I don't mind. Could I ask you to do that for me?"

I nodded and quickly shot off an email to Yamaji asking him to look into the other four.

"Dr. Higano, what do you plan to ask Otoha—"

Suddenly, a spine-tingling machine-altered voice shouted out, "Gahhh!"

It wasn't Dr. Higano, of course.

"Gahhaahaa!" the mysterious voice yelled out. It shrieked again in an unpleasantly high pitch, "Eeek!"

Dr. Higano picked up his tablet from the sofa. The sounds were coming from there.

A three-dimension CG bear—green and warped-looking—took up the whole screen. It had a red ribbon on its head, so it must have been a girl. The animation was so realistically smooth, which gave it the uncanny

valley effect of being even creepier.

“Wh-What is *that*?!” I spat.

“This is my investigative assistant. She calls herself Noi-tan.”

“Your...assistant?”

“I like Kirin, but I like Bears more,” Noi-tan sang, playing on old TV commercial catchphrases. “Can’t stop, won’t stop—Noi-tan!” She winked and stuck her tongue out.³

This *thing* was just too much.

“Doctorrrrr. I looked into the topic you asked me about—Wait, ahh!” Noi-tan turned toward me. She opened her bloodshot eyes widely and stared at me. She seemed to be looking at me through the camera in the tablet.

“Who are *you*? What are you doing at a hotel with Doctor?! Trying to sleep?! Trying to sleep with Doctor?! Is this a one-night stand? Not on my watch! Go home! If you don’t leave, I’ll get a bot army to dox you and troll you into oblivion on Twitter!”

“Noi-tan,” Dr. Higano said. “She’s the officer in charge of the case.”

“Just ‘cause she’s an officer doesn’t mean she’s not looking for a one-night stand! Oohhh...She must be the Doctor’s mistress! You were lying when you told me I was your partner!”

“My partner’s always my partner,” he said nonchalantly.

“Doctor, take a gooood look at her face. Looks like she’s trying to hit a home run tonight! She’s going to try to make herself your girlfriend! I bet she’d make you buy her dinner every month on your anniversary!”

“Yuri is a professional. She doesn’t let her private life get in the way of her work. Am I correct?”

“Absolutely,” I insisted.

But the animated Noi-tan was already baring her fangs. “We can’t trust her. She looks like a woman in heat!”

I did not! At least I hoped not.

“Doctor! You have to do something for me as a punishment for taking this other woman to a hotel.”

“And what might that be?”

“You have to kiss me!”

What the hell was this bear getting on about?

But Dr. Higano didn’t bat an eyelash. “Understood.”

He smiled, and blew her a kiss.

Complete with a wink.

Noi-tan was silent for a moment, then said, “Thank youuuu!” Her nose had begun to bleed in typical anime fashion.

“That bear is too much,” I muttered. “But she’s your...work partner? Not an AI or anything? What exactly is she?”

“Yes, she’s human. But we just have a contractual relationship, so I’ve never actually met her. Who knows, she could even be a man.”

Strange. That seemed like extremely lax oversight.

“How did you get to know this bear?”

“On Facebook.”

He was treating detective work like online dating!

“Noobs who can’t understand our relationship should stay out of it,” Noi-tan said. “Jealousy is unbecoming.”

I found the self-satisfied look on the green bear’s face strangely aggravating.

“So,” the bear said, suddenly serious. “About the research you requested this evening. Reina Myoko’s financial situation...”

Reina’s financial situation?

Dr. Higano noticed my doubt and turned to me. “People’s money has to move just like blood pumps through their body. It’s one of the first things

I had to look into.”

I took in what he was saying, but inside I was brimming with questions. I expected this of a cop, but Dr. Higano was just a private detective.

“How exactly did you look into that?” I asked.

The green bear played with her ribbon as she answered. “Tee-hee, you really *are* a rookie. There are plenty of ways to look into someone’s money as long as you don’t care about the legality of the method.”

“You didn’t hack into her bank? Or did you? That’s...not exactly something I can just overlook!”

“And what are you going to do about it?” Noi-tan said brashly. “Arrest me? You don’t know who I am or what I look like!”

Dr. Higano lightly tapped the camera lens with his middle finger. He looked like he was scolding a child. “Noi-tan, stop getting so worked up. With this investigation, there’s no need for illegal methods. If we need to look into her bank accounts, the banks will give us that information if the request is made through the police as a registered detective.”

“Doctorrrr! You’re giving away my secrets! I’m going to lose my mystique!”

Relieved, I stared daggers at Noi-tan. Shameless, she looked away from me. The CG was incredibly detailed.

“Mmphhh!” She coughed, bringing the conversation around. “So, the money. It’s only been half a day, so even with my superpowers I wasn’t able to look into everything, but I’m confident I have enough information to help with your analysis. I’ll begin with the conclusion.” Noi-tan raised an eyebrow and took on a serious tone of voice for the first time all night: “Reina Myoko had just over 100 million yen in assets.”

³ These are plays on old commercials for Calbee snacks and the Matsumoto Moving Center.

Reina had been renting an apartment in a wooden building that was about as far as you could get from a “high-end” lifestyle. She did drive a luxury BMW, but that was an exception; there was no other reason to think she was wealthy.

And Koichiro said he was still rebuilding his household finances. If his daughter had that much money, he’d never say something like that. It seemed likely that she was intentionally concealing her wealth and that even that apartment was meant to camouflage what she had.

It was difficult to imagine that Reina, a lone casino employee, built up that much money through legitimate means. So of course she could never tell her father about it.

But did *anyone* know about it? There had to be someone who knew about it and was hiding that fact. And if they couldn’t say anything about it, perhaps her death was connected to her money?

“But even so...” I mumbled.

I was still convinced Reina wasn’t *ordinary*.

And I didn’t think her mystery ended with the money.

I zoned out, looking over at the hotel entrance while I thought about Reina. A number of guests were coming and going, but there wasn’t anything unusual.

“Is everything okay?” Dr. Higano asked.

At first, it seemed he was talking to me, but I realized he was looking at someone behind me.

I turned around to find a man with slicked-back black hair. He gave the impression of a Johnny-on-the-spot concierge, and I thought he was for a moment, but when I looked closely I realized it was none other Shota Akiyama.

“*Huh?! Shota?* What happened to your hair? Didn’t you *just* have a dyed perm?”

“That was a wig,” Dr. Higano replied for him.

“A wig? What on earth *for?*”

Shota scratched his nose. “Don’t worry about that. There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

It wasn’t just his hair; he seemed completely different from earlier. His face was more masculine, and there was an intensity in his eyes.

What the hell was going on? Had I missed something?

I was completely confused, but this had to be something important. I straightened my collar.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll listen.”

“Umm...Well, it’s kind of important, so I wanted to let that guy Yamaji know. Is he still at the station?”

“Yeah, he should be.”

“Then I’ll go to the station.” He turned to walk away.

“Excuse me? Uhh, wait a second. There’s no reason for you walk away like that. We can go over togeth—Ah, but I have to watch the others.”

“I’ll wait here,” Dr. Higano said.

Dr. Higano wasn’t an officer, so I couldn’t just let him take over, but Shota had already walked off. I nodded and decided to leave the guard duty to him.

The doctor passed me the tablet. I looked at the screen and saw that Noi-tan had a psychotic-looking smile on her face and was gesturing with her hand. Take me with you, she seemed to be saying.

I put the tablet under my arm and quickly chased after Shota, who had already exited the hotel.

The hotel was only about 300 meters from Tokyo Bay Station. We walked the dimly lit alleys, which didn't match the rest of Odaiba. I looked at Shota from the side. He was walking briskly, his posture straight. And it finally came to me—Shota had only been pretending to be superficial.

What did that mean? I didn't have my thoughts together yet. I had too many questions, and it was impossible to know which one to ask first.

Eventually I asked the first question that came to me. "Shota, did you know that Reina had over 100 million yen?"

Shota opened his eyes widely. "Damn, you cops are impressive..." he stammered. His face tightened up. "I can't believe you figured that out so fast. When you need the cops, I guess—"

"You guess what?"

Shota looked me in the eyes and then averted his gaze. "I'll save it for later."

In the end, Shota didn't tell me anything that made a difference.

—

We made it to the station quickly. I showed Shota in and then turned to go back to the hotel.

I was annoyed. He clearly seemed to know something important and I had to wait to hear it. But I couldn't leave Dr. Higano alone on guard duty for too long, and I had to deal with Otoha Tamachi. The only solution was to leave Shota to Yamaji.

"Hey hey heeeeyyy," Noi-tan's strange voice called out to me. The timing couldn't have been worse. "Now I *know* you're a worthless rookie leeching off the taxpayers' dime—did you really think Shota was just some bozo with a part-time job? I'm right, right? Well, *you're* wrong. Why would you ever think that? Akiyama had a serious relationship with Reina. She's not gonna waste her time on a nobody!"

When Noi-tan put it that way, I knew she had a point, but I couldn't

believe Shota would actually go as far as putting on a wig to disguise himself.

Irritated, I kept the tablet under my arm and refused to look at it.

“Oh, the silent treatment? Is that what you’re doing now? Well, you can ignore me, but you can’t ignore the fact that you’re dumb as bricks! Did you think Dr. Higano was wrong? He saw through Shota’s disguise from the beginning and had me look into things.”

“Look into things?” I said, finally looking at the damn green bear again.

“Hehe. Want to hear something good? I’ll tell you, but nothing’s free: Promise me you’ll stop flirting with Doctor and I’ll tell you.”

“I haven’t been flirting with him,” I retorted.

And it wasn’t like my pitiful attempts at flirtation would’ve had any effect anyway.

“Then promise not to make anymore duck faces at Doctor. Promise not to talk so cutesy and not to purposefully let your bra strap show.”

“I wasn’t doing any of that in the first place!”

“Also,” she said, her animated face turning serious. “I want you to cut off your right hand.”

“*What?*”

Because her voice was artificially modulated, there was no way for me to know what she was thinking on the other side of the screen.

I felt chilled, like I’d been stabbed in the back with an icicle. I didn’t blink, and I could feel myself start to sweat.

Noi-tan continued to stare at me seriously, and then suddenly burst into hysterical laughter. “Pfff haaa ha ha ha!” She buckled over, clutching her stomach.

“I’m *kidding*, duh! Why so serious? Are you that dumb? You’re probably dumb enough to believe those urban legends on the net, like that the moon landing was fake.”

I was completely dumbfounded for a moment, then I bit my lip and looked up at the ceiling.

What was wrong with me? Why did I keep taking this bear at her word when she was just a bag of jokes? I was embarrassed about how quickly I'd gotten worked up.

"Well...I guess you basically agreed not to flirt with Doctor, so I'll tell you what I know. So listen up! And I hope this frustrates you!"

I stared at the awful bear.

It probably wasn't anything at all. I prepared myself for nothing.

"Shota Akiyama also has over 100 million to his name," Noi-tan said.

I just kept staring at her, waiting for her favorite words: I'm joking.

I mean, it was Shota Akiyama we were talking about. He seemed like your average young dude.

But what about everything he had said before he cleaned up his appearance?

I waited and waited, but Noi-tan didn't say anything else.

I looked up at the ceiling again.

Shota Akiyama, just like Reina Myoko, had saved up more than 100 million yen.

There were a few things we could confirm based on this fact: Shota and Reina had likely worked together to amass such a large amount of money. And they both made efforts to prevent anyone from realizing they had that much money.

And if this murder was connected to the source of that money, Shota probably had an idea who the killer might be.

I was abuzz with ideas, but there was something I had to take care of first.

I had to hear what Otoha Tamachi knew about Reina.

When I arrived at the entrance to the hotel, I realized a car was parked in the lot.

Maybe Otoha had arrived. My wristwatch read 1:20 A.M.

I looked up at the car. It was a red BMW.

—

I went back to the lobby and returned the tablet to Dr. Higano. He and Noi-tan began to update each other on what they'd missed while apart.

Not even a second later, the automatic entrance to the hotel slid open.

“Sorry to make you wait!” Otoha strolled towards us, her voice slow and easygoing.

Not having seen her for such a long time, I was first struck by the fact that she was more beautiful than I'd remembered. She was dressed stylishly in an elegant summer coat, a blue shirt, and a long skirt with a floral pattern. She had on pink flower-shaped earrings. Unlike me, she looked like a real “princess,” beautiful enough to make me feel self-conscious.

Junseiwa Academy had an ability to shield its students from social trends, and while there Otoha had been another unremarkable, unpolished adolescent girl. She must've discovered makeup and fashion after she graduated. Had she really become this beautiful?

I tried to recall my impression of her at that time, but nothing came to me. We hadn't been all that close, and it wasn't nice of me to say, but she hadn't seemed like anything other than one of Reina's hangers-on. I racked my brain, but all I could remember was chatting about shampoos with her when we happened to be alone in her dorm bathroom once.

"So Otoha, sorry to get right to the questions, but what can you tell me about that red BWM?"

Otoha tilted her head inquisitively. "What about it? My dad bought it for me."

That made sense. I was surprised the cars were the same, but there was no way the BMW Otoha had arrived in could've been Reina's still-missing BMW. I remembered the plate number, and of course it was different from the one we'd written down as Reina's.

Otoha took off her summer coat and leisurely sat down opposite Dr. Higano and me. She smiled bashfully at Dr. Higano in his white coat.

It was a tender smile, and gave her the warm air of a sunbeam. She was probably liked by everyone she met.

As one might imagine, Junseiwa Academy had been full of women just like her. Most of these women weren't competitive, didn't have a mean bone in their bodies, and, indeed, *required* this sense of harmony to live.

The classrooms had almost seemed to give off the pleasant aroma of warm milk.

As one of the *hoi polloi*, I always felt somewhat isolated from the rarified, enclosed environment. Then after Nadeshiko was murdered, the isolation was certainly no longer the product of my self-consciousness. I was actually ostracized from the group.

They never explicitly rejected me. Whenever my sister's death came up,

the other girls in the academy cried with me and were incredibly sympathetic, almost too kind. They were nice people, so I was thankful.

But they all considered me a foreigner of sorts. No one considered me part of their group, and none of them ever once thought of themselves as being on the same side as the victim. They were completely ignorant of their privilege. They deigned to look upon me with kindness.

And that's probably why alarm bells were going off in my head at that moment, despite the fact that Otoha seemed so sweet.

Dr. Higano introduced himself as a detective helping with the case, took out his cube puzzle, and looked straight at Otoha. "It seems you've been looking into Reina's case," he said.

"Yes. But all I was able to find is that she—" Otoha suddenly became choked up and put her hands to the corners of her eyes. She took out a handkerchief and wiped away her tears.

"You'll have to excuse me. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Reina," she choked out.

She cried quietly. I watched her, a little confused. When she had settled down I asked, "What exactly do you mean by 'I'm sorry'? Did something happen between you and Reina?"

She sniffed. "I had always wanted to apologize to her. But I wasn't able to in the end. I distanced myself from her during college after...something happened."

"You mean...You cut off ties with her?"

"Yes. And it wasn't just me. Everyone who was close with Reina during high school distanced themselves from her."

"You mean all the Bumblebees?"

Her eyes and the tip of her nose had reddened. She nodded.

"You guys were inseparable. How could that happen?"

She hesitated. Quietly, she said, "She...She cheated."

I frowned. I didn't know what she meant.

"I met a guy shortly after starting college," she explained. "Reina stole him from me. It's a little embarrassing, but I was just a teenager at the time and I was obsessed with being in a relationship, so it was really difficult to handle the betrayal. It felt like the Bumblebees had to choose between me or Reina, and they took my side and decided to separate themselves from Reina, like I did."

It seemed a little strange for a group as tight as the Bumblebees to have broken up because of romantic troubles, but this was not an uncommon adolescent occurrence.

However, there was something that didn't sit right with me. "Reina doesn't strike me as someone who would lose her head over a guy..."

"Reina was involved with a lot of guys," Otoha said. "Do you remember Sawazaki-sensei?"

I couldn't remember him from the name alone. Otoha reminded me that he had been the chemistry teacher, and after she provided some nearly-obsessive details about him, I eventually recalled him vaguely.

"Didn't he have to leave for some disciplinary reason?" I asked.

Sawazaki-sensei had always kept some distance between himself and students, so his dismissal, a pretty serious punishment, hadn't created much noise, but I did remember students spreading rumors about him.

"Yes," she confirmed. "That was Sawazaki-sensei. He had an affair with Reina while she was in high school."

"No way!"

Sawazaki-sensei was your average, married, middle-age man. There was absolutely nothing cool about him. I had trouble imagining any interaction between the two of them other than an ordinary student-teacher relationship.

"It wasn't just Sawazaki-sensei. She was dating guys from other schools while she was seeing him. And before that she was seeing a couple of

older guys as well.”

The almost holy ideal of Reina that I had held was being dramatically rewritten.

I was shocked, but I began to think. If this was the case, then maybe it wasn't that strange that she was dating Shota while engaged to Ken. Maybe Reina was the type to date anyone.

Dr. Higano listened attentively, his eyes settled on Otoha. He spun his puzzle between his fingers and said, “Let's assume that Reina dated obsessively. And that she stole your ex. Why would you want to apologize to someone who did something so awful to you?”

“First, let me clarify one thing,” Otoha said. “I don't think Reina was slutty or obsessive or anything. I just think she never turned down anyone who hit on her.”

“Interesting. She was beautiful, so there was probably no shortage of men who flirted with her. What you're suggesting, then, is that she wasn't being led astray by her emotions, correct?”

“Yes. But I still don't know why she went out with that many guys.”

Dr. Higano nodded slightly. “Yes, why didn't she reject them?”

“I don't know,” Otoha said. “I think it might've been something Reina just had to do.”

The doctor put a hand to his chin thoughtfully, and nodded. “I see. I think I know why you wanted to apologize. You realized that Reina stealing your boyfriend was something ‘she had to do.’”

Otoha opened her eyes wide. “Impressive...You're right. I think Reina cheated with him because she had to. In order to help me, she had to take my boyfriend from me.”

I was unable to follow. “What do you mean? How would Reina cheating with your boyfriend help you?”

“If I hadn't broken up with him, it might have destroyed my life.” Otoha bit her lip and then slowly continued her explanation. “He was worthless.

But I'd just graduated from Junseiwa—I was incredibly naive. A guy telling me he liked me was enough to make me giddy. I was convinced that it was fate, that it was love. I was totally blind. The Bumblebees were all so happy, seeing how infatuated I was. But Reina knew he was worthless, and she warned me a number of times I should break up with him. But I was so beside myself and head over heels in love that what she was trying to say never reached me.”

“So basically, Reina couldn't convince you to break up with him, so she cheated with him to rip him away from you?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Higano began to fiddle with his puzzle again. “Ms. Tamachi,” he said. “Can you tell us what specifically was the issue with this man?”

“He loved to gamble. And he played fast and loose with women. Not to mention that he was always trying to get money for one thing or another once he found out my family was wealthy. If that had been it, he'd have been like any other shitty guy, but there was something...more decisive in his case. Not long after we split up, he was arrested for fraud! He was part of some group that was doing bank transfer scams. If not for Reina, I might've been naive enough to be tricked into being part of a crime. When I think about it now...it's really scary.”

“You didn't try to get in touch with Reina again after you realized that she might have been acting in your best interests?” Dr. Higano asked.

“I wanted to. But she dropped out of school right after that and everyone deleted her contact information when we cut her out...” Otoha took out her handkerchief again. “But if I really wanted to get in touch with her, I'm sure there were ways. I'm sure if I hired a detective like you, they would've been able to track her down easily enough. But I didn't. I guess in the end I felt so bad, I just left things as they were. And it took—all *this*—to force me to get serious, but now it's too late. It's too late for me to apologize to Reina. No matter how many regrets I have, it doesn't change the fact that she...she's...”

Otoha began to cry, so I rubbed her back. Unlike me, she'd been close to

Reina all through high school. She must have been suffering much more than I was.

“I’m not going to let the killer get away,” I said. “That’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you,” she said faintly.

My determination redoubled, I turned to look at Dr. Higano. “Doctor, should we look into this guy? What do you think? He’ll have a previous case file, and we’ll be able to investigate as soon as we know his name.”

“Interesting. I think it would likely be in the best interest to look into him...”

However, his response was a little passive. He let his gaze fall to the puzzle in his hands.

I was a little put off, but he hadn’t outright rejected my suggestion.

“Otoha.” I turned to her. “Could you tell us what you know about this man? Even just his name?”

She thought for a moment. “His name was...Shota Akiyama. Yeah, that’s it.”

I was floored.

What the hell was going on?

Reina hadn’t ever ended things with Shota, even now. So had she really cheated with him just to help Otoha? Or did she just like him enough to take him from her?

No, Otoha said that Reina dated men because she “had to.” It didn’t make sense that Reina would feel the need to date someone who was committing fraud.

Or perhaps it was the other way around?

What if Reina kept dating him precisely because she found the fact that he was a criminal appealing?

And the results were clearly visible: both Reina and Shota had amassed

more than 100 million yen.

“Dr. Higano,” I huffed. “What the hell...”

I could sense we’d be closer to the truth if we got to the heart of this!

“Just a moment, Yuri,” Dr. Higano said. “I don’t have my thoughts together. There’s still something I have to ask Tamachi-san here.”

He had taken his eyes off the puzzle and turned his gaze to Otoha, who was sitting on the couch.

“Ask me? And what would that be?” She tilted her head endearingly.

“Just something rather...fundamental,” Dr. Higano said. “Are you actually Otoha Tamachi?”

I had no idea what he was asking.

My heart was pounding and I felt hot. My thinking was completely short-circuited.

I opened my eyes widely and looked at Otoha—no, I looked at the woman who called herself Otoha Tamachi.

“You don’t think I’m...me?” she asked incredulously.

Just like mine, her eyes were round as saucers. She seemed completely taken aback by the question. I thought her reaction was totally justified.

However, Dr. Higano nodded twice, three times, like her response somehow proved his theory exactly, and then looked at me. “Yuri. Otoha Tamachi was your former classmate. Is the woman before you really her?”

“Well, of course...” I started. Then I stopped myself.

Maybe she wasn’t.

I *had* had an incredibly strange feeling when she walked in—that uncertainty whether she’d actually been this pretty.

“Is this really Otoha Tamachi?” Dr. Higano repeated.

The blood rushed from my head. “I did feel...a little uncertain, but...” After careful consideration, I shook my head. “But there’s no way! How

could someone stand in front of a former classmate and blatantly lie about their identity?! It's so risky."

"Absolutely," Dr. Higano said encouragingly. But then he added, "That would be the case if we were talking about an ordinary person. However, this person isn't ordinary. You can't call someone so skilled at lying ordinary."

Otoha raised an eyebrow in a very natural look of consternation. "What the hell are you saying? I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you're getting at."

"Well, let's look at some of the signs of a liar: They avoid eye contact. They frequently cover their face with gestures. They get an awkward look in their eyes because the timing of their facial expressions is off and they focus on compensating around the mouth. They look up and to the right. They blink more often. Their voice lowers. They respond more slowly. When asked a question, they repeat it to buy time. They force unnatural changes in the subject of conversation. The list goes on."

"You're saying these apply to me?" She shook her head and looked a little frightened. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember doing any of those."

"Of course you didn't," Dr. Higano admonished gently. "*Conversely*. You didn't do *any* of those things." He began to spin his puzzle again. "You looked us squarely in the eye. When you were thinking, you looked up and to the left, not to the right. You never repeated anything we said, nor did you divert the conversation. You didn't show a single sign of someone who was lying." Dr. Higano paused for a moment and continued, "However, that in and of itself was strange."

He had completed his glass cube puzzle and held the finished product in his hands.

"People are usually cautious or nervous when they meet someone for the first time, not least a police officer in a murder investigation. Sometimes their memory is uncertain and they're not confident. If that's the case, like liars, they tend to blink a lot, their voice lowers, and there's an unnatural lag to their responses. But in your case, there weren't signs

of any of that. Zero. That's not natural. Now why would that be the case?" Dr. Higano stared into the eyes of this woman who called herself Otoha Tamachi. "It was because you have a complete understanding of what distinguishes a liar and made a conscious effort not to let those things show."

I was listening to him, dazed, but now I shook my head emphatically. No matter how logical his reasoning, I wasn't going to give in easily. "That's impossible. People aren't that good at lying. An ordinary person isn't capable of what you're talking about."

"Yes, I already told you she's not ordinary. Now, how is that possible? Perhaps she regularly painted over her life with a set of lies. Maybe her circumstances were so extreme that if she hadn't done so, her life would have collapsed. Her environment trained this unique skill." The woman shook her head quickly, as though scared. I still couldn't detect any deception in her manner.

"However, there's some truth to what you're suggesting," Dr. Higano said. "There's a remote chance that she just happens not to have the tells of a liar. But putting that possibility aside for now, let's see if we can deduce whether my premise is correct."

Dr. Higano brushed his collar, arranged his white coat, and then completely scrambled the cube puzzle he had finally finished.

"This woman actively sought out information about this case not because she was interested in the details but because she wanted to connect with the investigators. Her goal was to shift the investigation in a favorable direction. To take such an action means, first of all, that she was lying about having cut off contact with Reina. Indeed, it seems likely they're still quite close."

I looked at the woman, but her expression still revealed nothing beyond confusion.

"But then," Dr. Higano continued. "No matter how skillfully she spun her lies and fooled people, there had to be certain things in the case she wouldn't be able to twist the way she wanted."

“Like what, exactly?” I asked.

“There are things the police would be able to investigate and confirm even if she fooled us about them here. And if she’d kept insisting on her account, she would’ve lost credibility and cast suspicion on herself. So she avoided lying about those things.”

What he said was making sense.

“The way she mentioned Shota without seeming to know anything about him is also suspicious,” Dr. Higano continued. “Assuming she’s still in touch with him even now, it seems highly likely she also would’ve known Shota was still dating Reina. If she knew about their relationship, then she also could’ve surmised that the investigation would eventually get to him.”

“And if that happened,” I extrapolated, “Shota would talk to the police and he wouldn’t be able to lie. So she was telling the truth about him?”

“Yes, that seems highly likely. Thus, Shota and Reina were dating—this is a fact. They probably did cheat, or something like that—also a fact. And in the past he was arrested for fraud—this is definite.”

That’s when it occurred to me again that maybe Reina had kept seeing him precisely because she found the fact that he was a criminal appealing.

“In addition, there’s a chance that she found out from Reina herself that Reina and Shota had over 100 million saved up,” Dr. Higano said. “The investigation would track down the flow of the money at some point. She knew she couldn’t cover up any lies about that. And once the police realized the alarming amount of money, they’d obviously focus on whether and how the source of the money was related to the murder. Furthermore, this woman tried to lure us in that direction by talking about Shota as though he were someone important.”

She sure had convinced me.

“So you’re suggesting...?” I asked.

“That the truth is the exact opposite,” Dr. Higano said. “Shota actually has nothing to do with this murder.”

The woman remained silent.

“She also insisted that Reina was seeing multiple men. The fact that she wanted us to think that means something. At the very least, she used her story to make us think it was possible for Reina to be seeing Ken and Shota at the same time. It’s possible Reina was seeing a man who hasn’t been uncovered by the investigation yet. Maybe it would’ve been convenient for this ‘Otoha’ if she could make us think it was natural for Reina to be dating multiple men. Here’s the takeaway: I think there’s an important secret wrapped up in Reina’s romantic life.”

I gulped. I didn’t know whether any of his conjectures were right or not. But without a doubt, Dr. Higano had led me into mental territory I wouldn’t have been able to enter on my own.

Dr. Higano is incredible, I thought.

“By the way,” he added. “You mentioned that the girls in school close with Reina were called the ‘Bumblebees’?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Higano worked at his cube puzzle and looked at the woman. “She was trying to lead us down the wrong path. She lied a number of times. But what she was most trying to hide from us with her deception was this.” Dr. Higano brandished his once-again completed puzzle dramatically. “The Bumblebees are *deeply* involved with this murder.”

The woman calling herself Otoha Tamachi burst into laughter.

It started out as a simple snort: “Haha.” Then she became full-on hysterical: “Haaahahahaha!” She slapped her knee and laughed coarsely with her mouth wide open. It was a complete turnaround from the genteel, kind image she’d had up until that point.

“Who the hell is this guy?!” she cried. “He’s ridiculous. He’s spouting all sorts of crap. Hilarious. *Really* funny. Hahahaha! His mind moves pretty quickly, I’ll give him that much. But it’s all BS! Pure fiction!”

“I’m fine with fiction,” Dr. Higano said neutrally and placed the cube puzzle on a desk. The woman frowned skeptically, and he added, “The

truth has very little value.”

The woman turned serious. Even I thought his remarks seemed a little reckless.

“So you don’t care if you’re wrong?” she asked. “You can’t be for real.”

“No, I actually don’t mind,” Dr. Higano agreed, shaking his head. “What matters isn’t whether my deductions are factually accurate or not. I’m actually fairly certain that some of these conclusions are off the mark.”

The woman narrowed her eyes.

“In this case,” he continued, “what my conclusions elicited were meaningful. Don’t you think? When faced with my conclusions, your attitude changed. Regardless of what my conclusions were, you admitted that you couldn’t maintain the same ruse. I’m sure you’re aware of this, but part of the reason your attitude changed was because you gave in to me.”

If he hadn’t landed a blow, she would’ve been able to maintain her good-natured, composed manner. That was definitely the case.

The woman seemed to come to an understanding: It was impossible to beat Seiren Higano by playing dumb.

“I’ll admit this...” the woman said and paused for a moment. “I can’t lie for shit.”

She’d admitted it.

But why? It wasn’t like she had her back against the wall.

A bold and frightening smile played on the edges of her mouth. Otherwise her face was empty of emotion. It was like the grin on a praying mantis going after a kill.

Was this the real her?

Or was she just playing another role?

I had no clue. I didn’t know anything. I knew so little and I was so powerless. I wanted to pound the pavement and find the answers myself.

Who killed Reina Myoko? Who exactly *was* Reina Myoko? Where was Masquerade right now? I didn't know, I didn't know, I didn't know. I hated my powerlessness and incompetence.

Dr. Higano said that the truth didn't have any value, but I disagreed.

I wanted to know the truth.

I wanted to find the truth.

"Let me ask you again." Dr. Higano looked directly at the woman. "Who are you?"

She answered immediately: "I'm Otoha Tamachi...I'm Miyuki Yata...I'm Sena Hagawa...I'm Asami Ino...I'm Ryoko Omura."

Dr. Higano shook his head, and the woman announced, finally, "I'm Reina Myoko."

"You're lying, pure and simple." Dr. Higano put his hands on his head in frustration and went for a different question. "What are you trying to accomplish?"

"We are just taking revenge for Reina," the woman replied. Suddenly a look of animosity covered her entire face. "And we've already accomplished almost everything."

Just as I was going to ask her what exactly she meant, my phone rang. Yamaji's name was on the screen. I took the call but kept my eyes on the woman.

"Yamaji, things are crazy right now—"

"Get over here, now!" he yelled, preventing me from getting another word in. "Immediately. Wake up Koichiro Myoko and Ken Nakahigashi and bring them to the station with the Doc. ASAP!"

"What? Just a second..."

Yamaji hung up the phone without waiting for my response. "What's up with that? He didn't even listen to a word I said..."

But Yamaji wouldn't lose his head over something trivial. I wondered if

something had happened at the station.

“Seems like we have to go,” Dr. Higano said. He looked at the woman. “Would you mind joining us?”

“Don’t worry,” she assured me. “I’m not going to run away.”

She smiled calmly, reverting to her composed, good-natured manner.

Chills ran down my back. Was this really the same woman who, moments earlier, had been laughing hysterically?

I swallowed my fear and feigned calm. “Do you have the contact information for the Bumblebees?” I asked. Then shook my head and looked at her. “Actually...it would be a huge help if you could tell us the whole truth.”

Her expression softened a little, only around her mouth. “I don’t know anything. The only thing I know is a single truth. Would you like to hear it?”

That was when the woman who called herself Otoha Tamachi told her most blatant lie yet.

“Reina Myoko,” she said, “is immortal.”

—

12:10 A.M: An hour and ten minutes before Yuri and Dr. Higano confronted the woman calling herself Otoha Tamachi. Shota Akiyama ended a phone call and placed his smartphone on the hotel bed.

He wiped cold sweat from his forehead. His heart throbbed heavily, almost jumping out of his chest. He nearly forgot to breathe and broke out into a cough. He felt hot and took a sip of mineral water, but it seemed to slide down his throat without any effect. He tried over and over to make himself think.

He collapsed on the bed, shivering.

It can’t be, he thought. It just can’t be!

Before he had time to figure anything out, let alone prepare himself,

the doorbell rang. It was time.

He carefully got up and stood in front of the door. He took a deep breath and then gripped the doorknob.

He steeled himself and opened the door.

“Ahh,” he said.

He barely managed to keep from collapsing to his knees. At this moment, there was so much he could have thought, but the only thing that drifted into his mind was that, ahh, she was the most beautiful person he’d ever seen.

He spoke the name of the woman he loved:

“Reina Myoko.”

“It’s been a while, Shota.”

It was impossible for him to mistake her for anyone else. This was, without a doubt, the woman he loved.

If there was a God, He’d evidently taken more time than usual crafting her perfect face. The veins in her neck each seemed calculated to draw out her allure. Her eyes were like the ocean—they had the power to draw anything into their depths. Her lips remained unchanged: rose-like, coated with red lipstick that contrasted with her almost transparently white skin.

Those full and shapely lips drove Shota mad.

He didn’t know why she was alive. But before he could even begin to ask this question, he began crying from joy.

He quickly lost the strength to stand. His crying turned to intense weeping. He fell to the ground and clung to her long, thin legs.

The call he’d just received from a payphone had been her actual voice, not that of an imposter or illusion.

She looked at him affectionately, stroking his chin as she would a pet.

Shota’s heart filled with love for her, and as he cried, he began to lick

her red high heels as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Seeing this, Reina took her stockings in her hands and slowly rolled them down. The sight of her legs being bared alone was enough to make Shota hard. She balled up the stockings and threw them aside.

“Woof, woof!” Shota barked and rushed over to the stockings on all fours. Without using his hands, he took the stockings in his mouth and crawled back to Reina.

“Good boy,” she said.

She took the stockings from him and petted him on the head. Shota’s face erupted into a rapturous smile.

For a moment Shota remained pressed against the floor with Reina stroking his hair, but eventually he recovered enough to be able to speak. He stood, embraced her, and said, “You’re alive. So whose body was that?”

Though he hadn’t mentioned anything to Yamaji and the others, he’d been struck by a strange sensation when he saw “Reina’s” corpse.

Reina laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous. Does it really matter? All that matters is that I’m here now, and this is reality.”

But that wasn’t the case at all. Shota had heard the police saying the body was definitely Reina’s. Even if she had had a duplicate, surely that wouldn’t have fooled them.

And it didn’t change the fact that someone had died.

But since Reina had dodged the question, Shota couldn’t ask her anything else.

That was how absolute their relationship was.

“Shota, I have a favor to ask,” Reina whispered.

He looked into her eyes.

Just as always, he thought, her eyes are so deep they reveal nothing.

“Let’s tell the cops about the revenge we wanted,” she suggested. “Let’s

confess. They'll help us. If we tell them everything, they have the power to protect us from the syndicate."

"Sure. I'll go tell them."

It was decided.

With Reina, Shota didn't even have to think.

He took off his wig.

"Oh yeah." She handed him an energy drink. "You look tired. After the investigation, drink this...all of it."

"Thank you, Reina. Can I have it now?"

"No. After."

Shota nodded. If that's what Reina wanted, that's what he'd do. That's all he could do.

"What should I do after I confess?" he asked.

"Hmm," she mused, and pressed a finger to her lips, as though considering. "There's someone I want you to kill. Will you do it for me?"

"Of course." He didn't even hesitate.

He'd do anything for Reina.

Shota Akiyama had been turned into that kind of creature.

Dr. Higano and I stepped into an empty conference room to watch the video recording of Shota's questioning in Interrogation Room Six:

—

It's already past one? Wow, it's late. I know you're all busy, so I appreciate you making arrangements for this. I'll cut to the chase.

I know who the killer is.

No, it isn't Ken. Ahh, yeah...Well, I know what I said. I did it to buy some time...but don't get ahead of yourself. Please, just listen for a minute.

I'll tell you everything, just as it happened. You probably wouldn't believe me if I just blurted it out.

I met Reina around the time I was involved in the bank transfer scam. Yeah, I'm guilty. I was twenty, Reina was nineteen, I guess?

She was friends with the girl I was dating at the time. To be honest, I was only interested in this girl for her money. Her name?...I can't remember. No, I'm serious. That shows you how little I cared.

I think Reina was trying to break us up out of genuine concern for her friend. I didn't care much for Reina in the beginning, but my feelings quickly changed. I started looking forward to seeing her.

Why? Well, she was super hot, so there was that, of course. But her looks were actually unrelated. It was her...*being*, if you could call it that. She had an attraction so strong I couldn't escape it.

But before I could win her over, I got arrested for fraud. The person who accused me was none other than Reina herself. No, I wasn't mad at her. I was well aware of the risks that came with the dumb shit I was doing. And this was part of the package that came with getting closer to Reina. Just talking with her sharpened my intellect—she had that in her...So why

didn't I stop the bank transfer scam? Those guys were my friends...and we just kind of kept going on.

But I mean, I really regret not cutting that shit out. Not because I got arrested. But because I thought that Reina reporting me meant she was rejecting me.

But I was wrong. She came to see me in jail. During visiting hours, she proposed a little game.

No, you heard me right. A *game*.

She challenged me to get my sentence suspended by improving the judge and public prosecutor's opinion of me.

The prize was Reina herself.

I was eager to play.

After I was released on bail, Reina told me exactly what to do. She said it would be better in court if it really looked like I was reflecting on what I'd done and showed the potential of being rehabilitated. I knew if I were on my own, they'd see right through me. So Reina changed my fundamental values.

What awaited me was a complete correction of my character. It was like Reina was heating me up in a burner and flattening me over and over so I'd fit into a completely different mold. An example? One week she made me fast. And if I ever challenged her, she'd make me strip naked for three days or pull out my fingernails.

What'dya mean I was pretty obedient? Look, Reina *really* cared for me. I could tell. When she pulled out my nails, she was crying as much as though she were experiencing it herself.

No one had ever cared for me so seriously before, and no one has since. Not even my own family took me this seriously. I was over the moon that she was even *considering* dating me.

Then I became her possession.

Her special training worked, I won over the court, and they suspended

my sentence. I won the game.

That's when Reina and I started seeing each other.

I know what you're thinking. You think it's weird, or perverted, or that we weren't really dating, right? Well, you can think whatever you want. Reina and I were dating. We were happy. Does anything else matter?

You wanna know why Reina was dating me? Whether it could've been some reason other than love?

Well, I guess she could've been looking for a pawn. The game could've been a test to see if I could be her chess piece.

A pawn for what? It's obvious—revenge.

Right, I haven't told you her goal.

Reina wanted revenge.

Even while I was working through the court system, Reina was diligently planning her revenge. She reached out to the entertainment industry, to people in finance, to politicians—she started making connections with influential people all over. And she used that political strength and her charisma to continue making connections.

That's how Reina discovered the existence of a certain secret club.

The club met under the guise of a special association at a restaurant in Nishiazabu. The only members were people contracted with entertainment agencies or VIPS who paid tens of thousands in donations each month. The VIPS had access to the list of the celebrities who were members of the club. The system allowed the VIPS to select a celeb for an introduction. After they met, the restaurant had no involvement in their negotiations, and each party was free to do as they pleased. Models who weren't doing well would sometimes set up sugar daddy arrangements with them.

Reina? Ha, as if. You *do* realize Reina would never concern herself with something so trivial?

Reina was figuring out how she could break into the management side

of the club. Finally, she decided to act as a go-between. She rounded up some of the talent that was part of the club and started trying to find them clients.

And she knew where there'd be people with money. Think about where Reina used to work. Ring a bell?

Exactly, the casinos. The big winners at casinos had the cash and wouldn't be stingy because they made easy money. Reina got a job with a casino management company working as a promotional model and quietly reached out to gamblers who'd won big, so that the casino wouldn't know. Supposedly a lot of the winners were interested. And you can understand why, right? They'd finally won big, so they wanted to know what luxury felt like. And it's pretty easy to understand how sleeping with a well-known celebrity would feel like the highest sort of luxury, even if it was a kind of commonplace thing to want.

I helped her, too. With negotiating between the customers and the celebs. As a driver. As a bodyguard. Responding to trouble whenever it happened. I did whatever Reina ordered me to do. Several times it was so dangerous I really thought I might die.

These guys were paying ten, sometimes even a hundred times what the VIPs in the club were paying, and they did it with a smile on their faces. The gamblers had lost all sense of the value of money. Gamblers win or lose money in the range of hundreds of millions each day. A couple million was pocket change for them. You remember that case a while back when the son of the owners of Empress Paper Corporation⁴ embezzled 18 billion in company funds and blew it all gambling in Macao and Singapore? That guy was pretty famous as a high roller among gamblers. And that was just the society we were working with. We took kickbacks, and sometimes from the kickback alone we ended up taking in 100 million. The customers had their wildest fantasies fulfilled. A mountain of cash came in through the Nishiazabu restaurant. The celebs also ended up with a ton of cash and occasionally connections or patrons, depending on the circumstances. It was a win-win situation. Obviously, Reina came to be considered pretty valuable. She gradually worked her way into the

core of the operation.

Because she'd earned their trust, Reina was allowed to look at the list of VIP members. As she anticipated, the list included the names of major players in every industry you could imagine.

The preliminary work for her revenge was complete.

Right, you want to know *why* she was after revenge...

You already know that Reina's father's company went bankrupt, right? I think his name was Koichiro? The company didn't go under because of his incompetence. Politicians and rival companies joined forces and monopolized the market he was in.

Reina looked into the names of the people involved in stealing her dad's business: Taichi Asagaya, a Diet member from the National Party; Tatsuo Yamashita, a councilman from Minato; Daigo Oshitari of Oshitari Construction; and Heiji Nakahigashi of Central Construction.

Heiji Nakahigashi is Ken's dad.

Oh, so you've heard about his financial support when Koichiro was running for Metropolitan assembly? Yeah, he did. From Reina's point of view, what Heiji did was like paying for the funeral of a guy he'd stabbed to death. I don't know what he was thinking. Maybe he did it out of guilt, maybe because he just wanted to, or maybe he wanted to make sure Koichiro wouldn't hold a grudge. He probably thought getting involved made the most sense. Getting Ken engaged to Reina had to be part of that plan, too.

So that's where we were. It was pure coincidence, but Reina found Heiji Nakahigashi and Tatsuo Yamashita on the list of VIP members in the secret club. And that wasn't all: She also learned they both had sugar baby relationships with teen idols who were still in high school.

So she decided to take the fate of her targets into her own hands.

It was impossible for her to pass up such a perfect opportunity. She set up an appointment with a newspaper reporter to expose the scandals to the world—or was about to when all this happened.

Nobody knew what she was up to. At least that's what we thought, but we must've been wrong. They acted so quickly. They'd probably had an eye on us for a while.

I don't know who the killer was. Heiji Nakahigashi wasn't the only one afraid that the club's awful crimes would become public. There were a number of people who would've done anything to stop her and some who would've even killed to do so.

Don't you get it?

The killer was someone from that syndicate.

You'd never've believed me if I had said someone from "the syndicate" did it up front, right?

You still don't believe me?

Well, okay, but if you do a little digging you'll find that this secret club really does exist. Then you'll realize what I'm telling you is the truth.

I felt like I had to tell you guys this. Like I said, the syndicate is still after us. I'm probably the next target. They left Reina's foot in her apartment as a threat to me.

My only option was to escape the reach of the organization. So I made it seem like there was some love triangle with Ken and Reina and me to mess up their search. I was planning to leave the country and escape while they were confused. I mean, even if I told the police, this is the kind of thing they'd want to hush up, right?

But I changed my mind. Circumstances changed. And everything I've told you is the truth. You've gotta protect us.

That's all I've got. Now I've got something to do.

Oh, just gonna step out and drink this. Later.

—

"Then we found Shota dead in the bathroom," Yamaji reported.

He stood with a hand on his forehead, frowning in front of Shota's

corpse in one of the men's toilet stalls.

He'd died sitting on the toilet. His eyes were rolled back, and postmortem bruising was starting to appear on his neck. His slick-backed haircut was disheveled, like he'd pulled at it in pain, and the empty energy drink can had fallen from his outstretched hand. The almond aroma characteristic of cyanide wafted through the bathroom.

As one might imagine, it's not easy to see the dead body of a person who'd been alive just moments ago. I hadn't been involved in his death, but I was struck by a strange sense of guilt. It was all I could do to fight that feeling off. So I decided to leave the body to the forensics team; I didn't have the strength to look closely at the corpse myself.

The men's bathroom was shrill with the shutters of flashing cameras, but even after I stepped out, a brutal air seemed to fill the police station. A dead body inside a station was unheard of. It raised the specter of management, and someone would have to answer for it.

Yamaji was first on that list. He leaned against the wall in the hallway with a lollipop in his mouth.

"It was suicide," he said. "Had to be. That drink had cyanide in it. Shota left the interrogation room, took one sip of that drink he'd had on his chair, and ran into the bathroom where he must've finished the rest of the poison off. Marks show he pressed his mouth into his arm, apparently to choke off any screaming."

Dr. Higano was sitting in a chair nearby. He tilted his head. "He ran into the bathroom after just a sip?"

"Yeah. I thought he was acting a little strange and secretly followed him up to the stall. So there's no way anyone else could've been involved."

"Why didn't he just wait and drink it all in the stall?" Dr. Higano said. "What did Shota look like when he took the sip of the drink?"

"He coughed and turned pale. And he was mumbling something. 'Oh, so that's what,' or something, I think."

"That sounds like he didn't know the drink was poisoned."

“Even if that’s true, doesn’t change the fact that he killed himself. He chugged the whole thing even after he realized it was poison.”

“Yes, that is the case.”

“Dammit, he died right in front of me,” Yamaji said. “It’s a fucking disgrace! I’m never getting promoted now.”

He gnawed on his lollipop. His frustration likely was a product of his sense of justice and the fact that he hadn’t prevented the suicide, rather than any real concern over his position. That’s the kind of person Yamaji was.

I was suddenly overcome with exhaustion and plopped down onto the ground. My thoughts were hazy, but I managed to ask, “So...What was his motive for killing himself?”

“He was scared of the syndicate,” Yamaji said. “They brutally murdered his girlfriend. Maybe he thought it’d be better to go out less painfully? That’s probably also the reason he confessed everything—he was getting ready to die.”

“Hmph.” Dr. Higano grunted and put a hand to his mouth. He was clearly unconvinced.

“He said, ‘The syndicate is still after us,’” Dr. Higano repeated Shota’s words, and then looked at Yamaji and me. “Us. Who was he talking about? I thought it was just Shota and Reina, the two of them taking revenge.”

“Maybe...he just misspoke?” Yamaji guessed.

“Could be. But what if he didn’t? It would suggest that Reina is *still alive*.”

He had to be joking.

But the look on Dr. Higano’s face was not one that had just rattled off a silly joke.

Yamaji wasn’t looking at Dr. Higano so he didn’t notice the face he was making and just itched at his head.

“But the syndicate they formed,” Yamaji said and laughed. “Ha! This shit is too heavy for a couple of cops to go after. Someone like me gets too deep, they get wiped out. But we also can’t back down from something this awful.”

Yamaji might’ve been a little rash with how he worded things, but his resolve was genuine. Indeed, there was a fire burning in his glare, as though he was squaring off against a massive opponent.

To be honest, when Yamaji said badass stuff like that, it was more difficult for me to treat him like the dope he was...which was confusing.

I threw some cold water on him. “Uh, Yamaji, sorry to rain on your Parade of Justice, but this syndicate might not have anything to do with this murder.”

“Huh?”

“That was Dr. Higano’s conclusion. We just finished taking the account of Otoha Tamachi, or rather the woman calling herself Otoha. That’s how he concluded Shota isn’t connected to this case.”

“That true, Doc?”

“Theoretically, yes,” Dr. Higano said.

But the doctor’s theories were always rock solid.

He continued. “But we were just taking Shota’s word that this syndicate was trying to wipe out all traces of this secret club. We don’t have proof that it actually existed.”

Yamaji grimaced and sucked on his lollipop. “You think Shota intentionally lied and then died? Didn’t seem that way to me...”

“Based on what I could see on the tape, the chances that he was lying are pretty low. He was really convinced the syndicate existed and was responsible for this crime.”

“Duh, *that’s exactly why they used him.*” A now-familiar, modulated voice echoed from Dr. Higano’s tablet. On the tablet was none other than the gross green bear, Noi-tan; I’d never get used to seeing her.

Yamaji didn't seem fazed, so he must've already been familiar with Noi-tan. Well, he had known Dr. Higano a lot longer than I had.

"They could stall the investigation by making it seem like the crime was committed by this mysterious syndicate," she said. "Even if you did investigate the secret club, there are so many bigwigs involved, you'd be tiptoe-ing on your tiptoes! It'd take so much damn time you'd be pulling your hair out. *They* put you in this situation by forcing Shota to confess and then having him kill himself! There's no way I'm wrong—I'm a freaking genius!"

I hated to belabor the point, but how much information were the police leaking to Dr. Higano, for one, but also this shady green bear?

I could easily get sucked into that thought as into quicksand, so I put it out of my mind for now.

Noi-tan did have a point. And I knew that there was at least one woman who wanted us to think Shota was involved.

Yes—the woman calling herself Otoha Tamachi.

"Ah, Yuri, here you are." Kondo from the 1st Investigative Unit called over to me in a loud voice. There were creases starting to appear in his usually refreshed-looking face; he looked exhausted from working so late.

"Kondo, what's up?"

"Remember how you asked me to look into some of Reina's friends from school? I heard from Yamaji and did a quick check..."

"Yeah, and there wasn't anything all that useful on the database?"

"No, I actually found something pretty serious." Kondo, perplexed, ran a hand through his short hair. "All five of the people you asked about had missing persons reports filed for them at the same time five years ago."

My eyes opened wide. "Otoha, too?"

"Yes. Otoha Tamachi, Miyuki Yata, Sena Hagawa, Asami Ino, and Ryoko Omura."

All of Reina's Bumblebee girl gang were missing.

What does that mean? I thought. And who the hell is this woman we have claiming to be Otoha?

I felt heat creeping up my neck. All of the Bumblebees were missing. Of course something ridiculous like this would happen.

Earlier, Dr. Higano had theorized: “The Bumblebees are *deeply* involved with this murder.”

Shota Akiyama had just died.

And we had no idea where the Bumblebees were.

“You look stumped, Yuri.” Dr. Higano stood and patted me on the shoulder. “For the time being, let’s take care of the new questions that’ve arisen from Shota’s account. I’m sure there were things that felt a little too convenient when you were listening to his story.”

“Yeah?” I said. “Hmm...”

There were definitely some things I wasn’t sure about, but was I on the right track?

Nervously, I ventured my opinion. “It’s a little too pat that Heiji Nakahigashi, Reina’s supposed target for revenge, was her fiancé’s father, right?”

“Exactly,” he said.

I sighed in relief. I hadn’t disappointed Dr. Higano.

“Ken Nakahigashi,” the doctor continued thoughtfully. “I think we have to consider the fact that he’s involved in Reina’s scheme.”

⁴ This (in the Japanese, “Jooh Paper Corporation”) is a pun on the existing Daioh Paper Corporation.

I got off the elevator. Ken, who'd been left waiting outside Interrogation Room Six, immediately pounced.

"Is Shota really dead?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"How?!"

"They're still looking into it."

In fact by now the forensics team was pretty sure of the cause of death, but there was no need for me to tell him that. Ken had on a poker face, but he was starting to sweat.

And I knew why. Shota had been killed for helping Reina take revenge, and now Ken was wondering if he was next. Based on the taped interrogations, Shota didn't seem to know, but Ken also must have been involved in Reina's scheme.

Koichiro Myoko stood behind Ken, looking haggard. It was 3:05 A.M., but it wasn't only the late hour that made his face so pale.

Koichiro glanced to his left. "Who's she?"

In contrast to the other two, the woman was elegant and poised. She bowed deeply.

"My name is Otoha Tamachi. I was fortunate to be close with Reina when we were in school."

"I see..." Koichiro said. He looked confused.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

Koichiro hesitated before responding. "I realize I'm saying this as Reina's father, but she looks so much like Reina. Forgive me...I know that's kind of a weird thing to say, isn't it?"

Ken wiped the sweat from his face and agreed, "No, Koichiro, I know

what you mean. I realize this Tamachi-san is a different person, of course, but...It's not just how she looks. It's also how she carries herself, her whole air."

The two of them looked suspiciously at the woman, who was unfazed.

"Tee-hee," she laughed. "It's such an honor to be compared to Reina. She was amazing."

—

We gathered again in Interrogation Room Six. The six of us made the interrogation room, which was one of the larger ones in the police station, cramped. Ken sat on the sofa, and Koichiro and the woman calling herself Otoha stood to the side. Yamaji sat in a chair behind a desk facing them all, and Dr. Higano and I stood next to him. Dr. Higano's familiar tablet PC and glass cube puzzle lay on the desk.

Noi-tan had apparently completed Dr. Higano's previous request and discovered newspapers with the articles he was looking for:

—

Central Construction Names Ken Nakahigashi, Third Son of Founder, Next President

—

I read the article that followed:

—

In a press release, major construction contractor Central Construction announced that current president Heiji Nakahigashi would be stepping down from his position as president this year due to health concerns. The company also announced that Ken Nakahigashi, the former president's third son, would succeed him in his position. Previously, the current Vice President and Director Tateki Nakahigashi, Nakahigashi's eldest son, had been expected to succeed, but Nakahigashi Sr. reversed his decision and chose Ken Nakahigashi instead. The decision was

approved by the Board of Directors, but the sudden change does appear to have sparked some confusion within the company. Ken Nakahigashi is 27 years old and a graduate of Teito University's economics program. Though he is Nakahigashi's third-born son, he was the child of an extramarital affair and is not biologically related to Nakahigashi's wife, Yoko. Ken Nakahigashi has served as head of R&D at the Yokohama Branch of Central Construction and is well respected within the company for his work. However, a promotion from section chief to president is a nearly unprecedented move.

—

While I read, Nakahigashi leveled his gaze at me, but not for long.

“Yeah,” he said. “Reina and I set my dad up with an underage model. We threatened him so I could become president.” He sneered. “He was a regular at the secret club for a long time. But I knew that he’d always evade the charges unless we had airtight proof of a real crime. So we got Reina in with the club. We planned meticulously, and when we were finally ready to put everything into action, we set up my dad with the model through a producer I was friends with. Our plan worked like a charm.”

While he confessed, Ken allowed a little smile to float up on his face. Yamaji, on the other hand, grumpily put a hand to his stubble.

“I mean, a crime’s a crime,” Yamaji said. “But is an underage model really enough to take down a president of a major corporation? It’s really not *that* big of a deal, right?”

“The scale of the crime doesn’t matter when you’re stirring up a scandal,” Ken said. “All that really matters is how you manipulate the masses. Using their jealousy is especially effective. Such as people in the establishment arrogantly abusing their position of power to sleep with some of the talent an ordinary person only sees on TV. Whenever that happens, your average Joe just eats it up.

“The righteous indignation of the masses is just a cover,” he continued.

“The public just wants to vent their spleen—pretty distant from the ‘justice’ they claim—until the scandal starts to lose its flavor. So it doesn’t matter if the crime is minor, as long as who it’s pinned on can’t talk their way out of it. And that was certainly the case with our charge: lewd acts with a minor.

“Not to mention,” Ken added smoothly, “any other important, powerful people who were also part of the secret club would’ve been dragged out into public because of my dad’s case. Another reason he had to give in to our threats so he didn’t make everyone around him go down, too.”

While Ken had been speaking, Dr. Higano had listened carefully, nodding intermittently. He asked, “You must’ve needed a lot of time to prepare. When did you get to know Reina?”

“When she was 18. I remember she was still in college. She researched everything about my family in her hunt for revenge and approached me. She aligned her interests with mine, which was getting to the top of the company, and we joined forces.”

It seemed that Reina had definitely been using Ken and Shota to take revenge for her father.

“Were you aware that Shota was also helping her with her plan?” I asked.

“Reina never said a word about him. My role was just one of support from the sidelines, so I figured she must have had some grunts on the ground. I was surprised to hear she was sleeping with him, but she convinced me that it was necessary to make him her loyal puppet. Logically it made sense—that’s the kind of woman Reina Myoko was.”

“Do you think some kind of syndicate was involved in her murder?”

“No, I don’t. If a syndicate wanted to shut her up, there were faster ways to do it—waiting until my father announced his resignation would be too late. Besides, it’s almost unthinkable that an organization trying to keep someone quiet would draw attention to itself by making her murder look like a Masquerade copy-cat crime.”

I followed his logic completely.

“But if Shota was killed,” he said, “then maybe this syndicate is involved, even if it doesn’t make sense. That’s what I’m starting to think.”

“Shota killed himself,” Yamaji said bluntly.

“Is that so? Then...that means the syndicate isn’t involved? That would be great news for me.”

“I’m sure it would. Everything went as you planned, and you successfully removed your father from the president’s seat. Come to think of it, after that you didn’t need Reina anymore. Were you planning to call off the engagement?”

“Absolutely not. Reina was working with me and thinking about what came next. She helped carry out the plan precisely because she saw the benefits of being the wife of the president. And I’d been impressed by her skills and also wanted her to be my wife.”

“But Reina had something different in mind,” Yamaji said.

He put a lollipop in his mouth and twirled it around. Oh man...That was a sign he was particularly displeased.

Ken had a complicated home environment, and I could imagine him resorting to dirty tactics to take the position he wanted.

However, Yamaji was another matter. He wouldn’t forgive someone for that, no matter what their reasons were.

“Why don’t we talk about something that the Doc and Princess here don’t know about? During the questioning you were clearly hesitant to talk about the whole thing at the café. I thought that was strange, so I had one of my guys look into it. He got to talk to the café’s waiter.”

Though Nakahigashi hadn’t flinched once while confessing to how he trapped his father, now his face suddenly stiffened.

Yamaji continued: “You argued with the victim at Sea’s Ale...but I guess it was more like you just yelling at her. This attracted the waiter’s attention, so he listened in. You were saying that—”

“Wait,” Nakahigashi interrupted. “That’s enough. I’ll tell them myself.” He gritted his teeth for a moment, and tried to arrange his expression to one of nonchalance. “Reina was breaking up with me.”

“Aha. So *she* had finished using *you*,” Yamaji noted sarcastically and then stared grimly at Ken.

“I don’t know why she’d do something like that. It was heartless of her to change her mind. She was completely ungrateful as to how much I had helped her accomplish. You could call it a betrayal.”

I never expected someone like Ken to be using the word “heartless.”

“And what about *that thing* you did?” Yamaji prodded.

Nakahigashi reluctantly nodded. “I was trying to tell her to calm the fuck down. To let her know it wasn’t like she’d accomplished everything on her own. I’d bought her these Jimmy Choo pumps for her birthday. I made her take them off right there in the restaurant and took them from her. I was trying to make her understand that everything we’d gotten, even the things she was wearing, we’d gotten together. She didn’t really respond to that. She just left the shoes behind and left the restaurant.”

“So that’s the empathy you bring to the table as president of a big company?” Yamaji commented.

Ken’s cheek twitched in annoyance. He ignored Yamaji and continued.

“That was a mistake. If I’d known something like this would happen afterward, I never would’ve made her do something that would draw so much attention.”

“You made a grown woman walk home in her bare feet. Obviously it’s easy for you to say that now.”

“The restaurant was in the central part of Odaiba. There were plenty of stores nearby where she could’ve bought other shoes. She didn’t walk home in bare feet...I just wanted her to reconsider. I wanted to marry her.” Ken sounded like he was starting to choke back tears. “I wanted Reina.”

He seemed to be telling the truth. For the first time I thought I could see his feelings for her—attachment, love—welling up in his eyes.

His love for her was warped, but you couldn't say it didn't exist. If it didn't, he wouldn't have been party to her scheme for so many years.

Click, click click, click.

The sound of Dr. Higano's cube puzzle spinning began to echo through the now-silent room.

He was spinning the puzzle at an incredible speed. It was almost frightening how quickly it was moving, but a second later he had completed it. His face was blank, so I had absolutely no idea what he was thinking.

Dr. Higano puffed a sigh and said, "Ken took Reina's pumps, so she had to buy new ones. She bought the new shoes immediately. But they weren't worn in yet, so she got blisters on her heels. Which is why the skin was peeling off her corpse."

Come to think of it, Dr. Higano had brought up the blisters of her feet at the first questioning.

But...Was that detail so important that he had to repeat it now?

"Huh?" I asked.

Why was it so important?

As always, Dr. Higano had a calm, collected look on his face. Yet for some reason I could not identify, I was petrified.

But when I looked around the room, no one else seemed to be put off by him.

Am I overthinking it?...Maybe so. I looked at the doctor more closely. He seemed incredibly normal. I didn't know why I felt so strange.

Some deep-seated fear rising within me had me shaking. But why? I couldn't stop the trembling.

Koichiro Myoko had kept completely silent through this recital, his face

pained.

“Ken,” he started to say. “I know you loved Reina in your own way. I also know that there were things Reina was using you for. My daughter was dishonest at times, that’s just a fact. However—”

Koichiro grabbed Ken by the collar and threw him from the sofa.

“How dare you!” he yelled, and began to pummel him.

Ken was helpless in front of Koichiro’s sudden onslaught. Koichiro pressed him down, sat astride him, and gave him a solid punch in the face. Yamaji rushed to break it up, but before he could, Koichiro opened his eyes wide, seemed to understand what he’d done, and stopped himself. He was breathing heavily, trying hard to calm himself down.

Ken struggled up and coughed. Something small flew out of his mouth—one of his front teeth.

Reina’s father was still in shock at his own actions. Ken looked at him, then covered his eyes and lowered his head. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t say anything so you wouldn’t suspect me. That was clearly a mistake.”

Koichiro, clearly still emotional, muttered, “No, it wasn’t that...Or do you mean it was Shota?”

“What are you talking about?”

“In any case, if you’d really been thinking about Reina, you should’ve tried to stop her plan for revenge. Even if just for my sake. Obviously I wouldn’t have wanted her to do something so dangerous. Why didn’t you or Shota think about what would’ve made her happy? I think she was testing both of you. She wanted to find someone who really loved her.” He began to cry and then said in a quiet voice, unable to contain his emotions any longer, “If that was her plan, then you all betrayed her.”

Ken was silent and bit his lip.

“So which of you was it?” Koichiro asked.

“Which of us was...what?”

For some reason, Koichiro looked irritated. “Whose kid was she

pregnant with?”

Reina had been pregnant.

This could not be a coincidence. In some strange way, this had to be related to the case.

After Koichiro's stunning statement, I immediately checked with forensics. Forensics wouldn't have missed a fetus if the corpse had one, so it should've been in the report. I contacted them again, but they said there hadn't been one.

"She was definitely pregnant," Koichiro said. "I went with her to the hospital."

"She must've had it aborted after that," Dr. Higano said. "Abortions leave hardly any scars. Forensics could've missed it with a quick first pass."

Koichiro hung his head. "Is that what she did? Why would she have an abortion? I...thought you all already knew she was pregnant. But not even Ken knew." Koichiro put his hands on his head. "Whose kid was she carrying?"

I looked over at "Otoha" thinking she might've known, but she shook her head.

"Unfortunately I didn't know either," she said.

But the woman was a liar. So I had no idea if she was lying or telling the truth. And I didn't think we'd find anything out from her now.

If that was the case, no one here knew the answer to Koichiro's question.

Or...

"I'll answer that," Dr. Higano said, straightening his jacket.

Koichiro opened his eyes wide. "How?...Come to think of it, you did already know that she was pregnant."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. Dr. Higano raised one hand to apologize for keeping quiet about it.

I wondered when the two of them had talked—and then remembered that Dr Higano went to Koichiro's hotel room to follow up on a few things he hadn't asked at the interrogation. Maybe that's when they'd discussed it.

"It was *meee!*" A voice issued from the tablet on the desk. "I looked into all of the medical clinics Reina visited recently."

Onscreen, Noi-tan had a look of supreme self-satisfaction. Before anyone could say anything, Dr. Higano silently flipped the tablet over.

"Nooo, Doctorrrrrr! Why? Why?"

He turned off the tablet. The bear disappeared; she was a total mismatch for the serious situation.

"I don't care how you figured it out right now!" Koichiro said. "If you know, tell me. Whose child was it?!"

"Whose child?" Dr. Higano smiled. "Is that really what you should be asking?"

Everyone, myself included, was wide-eyed, unsure of what he meant.

"I don't think there's any need to stand on ceremony. After all, I already know everything about Reina's murder."

"What do you mean by...everything?" Koichiro asked, his voice trembling.

"Everything," Dr. Higano responded.

He took the cube puzzle on the desk into his hands.

"Now then," he said and stared at the puzzle with an emotional intensity. He took it with both hands and twisted it with great force.

Snap.

The puzzle separated in the middle, as though it had been decapitated.

"We need to dissect this case," Dr. Higano said, "and expose what lies

within.”

He plucked off each cube from the puzzle and let them fall to the table. The overhead light made them flash like counterfeit jewels.

They were a sign for the hopeless conclusion he had come to.

We were all completely transfixed by Dr. Higano’s act of destruction. He’d drawn us all in, convinced that we’d missed something important in the case.

“Let’s look at everything in order,” he said. “First, why was her body in the park?”

I snapped from my daze and said, “Wasn’t it...because the killer was pretending to be Masquerade?”

Dr. Higano nodded. “When someone sees a body with its face cut off and a limb missing, the first person that comes to mind is Masquerade. It makes sense that the killer was trying to make it look like one of Masquerade’s crimes. However, it was a red herring—a misdirection. He made people think what he wanted, and concealed the most important details.”

Dr. Higano took the glass cubes in his hand.

“What he wanted to hide was the fact that he had to cut off Reina’s foot.”

I wrinkled my brow. Why the hell would he have had to cut off her foot?

“Yuri, imagine you were in Shota’s position. You receive a strange message from Reina, get to her place, and find a severed foot. What would you think?”

I closed my eyes and thought carefully. I imagined looking at the severed foot—it was impossible to have any good thoughts about that.

“Someone might’ve killed Reina...That’s what I would’ve thought.”

“Yes, that’s to be expected. There was a foot in her apartment, after all. However, the truth wasn’t so simple.” Dr. Higano continued theatrically. “When Shota found the foot, Reina *hadn’t yet been killed*. At that point,

she was still alive.”

“Nope,” Yamaji contradicted him immediately. “Doc, that’s impossible. Forensics found that the foot matched the body in the park.”

“Yes, I know.”

Yamaji wrinkled his brow, and Dr. Higano continued.

“Do you remember the cause of death forensics discovered? The knife wounds to her heart were the cause of death, not the loss of her foot. We could tell from her vital reactions that the foot was removed while she was still alive. If you think about it, the most sensible order for the killer would be like this: First, incapacitate her at her apartment by stabbing her in the chest. Then, before she dies, cut off her foot and her face. That would have associated the killing with the way Masquerade takes home a body part after he kills.

“However, what the killer did was really the opposite of that.”

In other words, I thought to myself...

“Reina’s killer cut off her foot with a chainsaw and then, *after allowing a substantial period of time to elapse*, stabbed her in the chest and killed her.”

At his awful explanation, I had to press my hands against my temples. If it was true, her murder was unspeakably cruel. Even if she’d been given anesthesia, she would’ve spent an awful period of time without her foot.

“Why would he do something so horrible?” I asked.

“To obfuscate the time and place of the killing. Up to this point, we thought Reina returned home after the café and was killed during the period of time from between when Shota received a message from her and when Shota called the police. In other words, from 7:11 P.M. to 7:48 P.M. However, this was not the case.” Dr. Higano paused and then continued. “The killer abducted her on her way home from the café, tied her up with rope, gave her the anesthesia, and cut off her foot. Then he stopped the bleeding so she wouldn’t bleed out. Next he took her by car to somewhere isolated. He took her phone and at 7:11 P.M. made a call from

another location via LINE. The reason she didn't say anything over the phone is, obviously, because she wasn't there."

Yamaji scratched at his hair. "We had considered that the call might've been a setup," he said. "The estimated time of death calculated from the state of rigor mortis was between 6:00 P.M. and midnight because her leg had been soaking in the water. But there's no way the foot was cut off at a different time from when she was stabbed in the chest."

"Yes, the killer knew exactly what we'd think," Dr. Higano said. "He made sure to have a solid alibi for 7:00 P.M., then waited for the right time, went back to the car where Reina was still alive, and stabbed her in the chest, either in the car or somewhere nearby, I'm not sure. He cut off her face to make us think it was Masquerade or someone trying to copy Masquerade. Then it would make sense that he cut off her foot."

"If we were able to determine an accurate time of death, his alibi would be meaningless, so the body couldn't be discovered right away. That's why it's not unusual that the body didn't turn up for a while. Otherwise he would've gone to all that trouble to create an alibi and never even be able to use it. So he decided to abandon the body on the tetrapods in the park and put her leg in the water. That way the disintegration would help him disguise the time of death and at the same time control when the body would be discovered. He knew it was unlikely the body would be discovered shrouded in darkness and that there was a good chance it would be discovered at a certain point in the morning."

I screwed up my face. "Discovered at a certain point?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

The body was by no means in an obvious location, so it would've been tough for the killer to predict when exactly it would be found. The first person to see it had been an old man out walking in the morning. It had been a total coincidence.

"A designated kindergartener school path went through that area, didn't it?" Dr. Higano said.

"What?!"

I realized he was right. As long as little kids walked through the area in the morning, the chances of the body being discovered would've been high.

Did that mean the killer had planned for kindergarten-aged children to come across a grotesquely mutilated corpse with its face cut off?

"He's not human," I said.

Yamaji made it clear he was disgusted. "He was trying to make kids discover the body. He cut off the victim's foot so he'd have an alibi, then cut off her face and got rid of it. This is some twisted shit."

Dr. Higano made no sign of agreement or disagreement. He continued, "The killer made the call from Reina's phone so we'd mistakenly think he had killed her in the brief 37 minutes between 7:11 and 7:38. All three of the men we questioned, Shota included, had alibis for that period. However, if we assume he cut off the foot in the three-hour period after she left the café at 4:00 P.M., and also that she was killed before midnight based on the coroner's estimated time of death, then conveniently for us, *one person no longer has an alibi.*"

I remembered that Dr. Higano had asked each man about their alibis from 8:00 P.M. onward at the beginning of the interrogations.

I rushed to open the records on the desk. Just as Dr. Higano said, only one of the three men no longer had an alibi.

"It can't be!"

But—he was her—

I looked at the killer.

If it was him, why had he been acting the way he had until now?

I was overcome with shock. Dr. Higano ignored me. He matter-of-factly named him: "Koichiro, it was you."

At this, Koichiro didn't panic. He stood stock still, the blood draining from his face. He looked like he was still catching up to what was going on. I couldn't get any read on what he was thinking.

Ken spoke up in place of the dazed Koichiro. “Just because he doesn’t have an alibi doesn’t instantly make him the killer, right? It just means that of the three people you questioned, one of them doesn’t have an alibi. Maybe the killer is someone who isn’t here right now. This woman here doesn’t have an alibi, does she?” He looked over at “Otoha.” She responded to his charge with a graceful smile.

“What motive would Koichiro even have to kill Reina in the first place?” Ken continued. “She was trying to avenge *him*. Even if their parent-child relationship wasn’t good, he’d never do something like that. After all, no matter what, it’s only natural to think he really loved her.”

“Your questions make sense,” Dr. Higano said. “I don’t know what his motive was yet.” He began to pick up the pieces of the puzzle he had disassembled. “However, if we arbitrarily assume that Koichiro was the killer, I can then theorize what his motive would have been.”

He looked at Koichiro through one of the glass cubes.

“And this theory will demonstrate my true value as a detective.”

Koichiro was still wide-eyed. He hung his head and looked away. I couldn’t tell if he was silent from shock at being accused, or because, given the circumstances, he had nothing to say.

Dr. Higano looked away from the glass cube and turned toward the woman.

“Otoha—I don’t know if that’s your real name, but I hope you don’t mind me calling you that for convenience’s sake—when we questioned you, you attempted to make us think the killer was someone from an imaginary syndicate, did you not?”

The woman shook her head with a smile. “You can think what you like. As far as I’m concerned, I gave no such suggestion.”

“Yes, but right now we are running with the assumption that Koichiro is the culprit. So please allow us to continue under the assumption that someone from the syndicate wasn’t the killer.”

There was nothing she could say to that. The woman let out a small sigh

and went silent.

“If Koichiro was the killer, then Otoha covered his tracks with this story about the syndicate and protected him. Why would she do that? The rational response would be that she, too, was helping Reina take her revenge.”

“Even if I told you you’re wrong,” the woman said, “you’re still going to keep going, aren’t you.”

“Yes. Now then, let’s assume that everything Otoha said when we questioned her was convenient for Koichiro...Yuri.”

“Y-Yes.” I straightened my spine.

“I assume you recall that Otoha told us Reina was involved with many men? And that from what she told us, I was able to determine that she was trying to manipulate us into thinking that Reina naturally dated many men at once, and that there might be some secret wrapped up in Reina’s romantic life.”

“I remember.”

“Now I think there’s only one way to think about this. Otoha learned directly from Reina that she was pregnant. She also knew whose child it was. Then she pretended that Reina was dating multiple people so we wouldn’t be able to guess whose child it was...Oh, and of course, she was lying just now when she said she didn’t know Reina had been pregnant.”

I looked at the woman, but as always she remained graceful and showed no sign of being shaken.

“Okay, let me go over it again,” Dr. Higano said. “Who was Otoha trying to protect?”

I thought for a second...and finally understood what he was getting at.

“Ah,” I started to say.

But I couldn’t accept it.

That was impossible. It was too...disgusting.

For some reason, my eyes began to fill with tears.

And that's when I realized how much Reina had been a special, almost holy presence for me. At Junseiwa, I had felt lonely, confined, and tremendously insecure. And this above all was why I was struck by her purity. Amidst everything else, Reina Myoko had an almost symbolic existence at Junseiwa Academy. A distant, unreachable existence.

Her light shone brightly, and I spent my adolescence walking with my head lowered.

I had wanted to make that school, and my adolescence, something special. But despite my best efforts, something vulgar and disgusting had wormed its way in. I didn't want to accept it. So I instinctively denied it.

However—the reason Reina had an abortion. The reason she ended her engagement with Ken. Koichiro's motive. Everything started to come together.

“That's right,” Dr. Higano said mercilessly, unaware of my feelings. “Koichiro. It was your child that Reina carried in her womb.”

Silence.

After a long moment, Ken broke it.

“B-But,” he said, his stoic poker face broken, showing clear distress. “That's totally insane.”

“*Let it be insane,*” Dr. Higano said.

I hated it when his language became so intense.

“The *truth* has very little value here.”

He flicked one of the glass blocks he was holding. It hit another on the table.

“It doesn't matter whether the theory is correct or not. What does is how he reacted to this conversation.”

I looked at Koichiro.

If Dr. Higano's theory was purposefully off the mark, he should've been

confused or angry.

I was hoping for that reaction.

“Ah, n-no...” he said.

But then Koichiro gritted his teeth. His clenched fists were trembling.

It was all totally obvious.

I suddenly felt utterly drained and held my head in my hands.

“Wait a minute,” he said.

But “Otoha” smiled and cut in.

“Obviously Reina’s dad doesn’t have an alibi. And based on his reaction, he might even have had a physical relationship with her that would give him a motive. But that’s it. That’s not proof he was the killer.”

“Absolutely,” Dr. Higano agreed.

“I’m still pretty suspicious of the syndicate. They had plenty of reasons to go after her. Plus, they’re so massive, no one would *ever* believe they did it.”

“First, I’ll attempt to prove it was Koichiro.”

The doctor wasn’t operating as she expected. In the face of Dr. Higano’s attitude, she just smiled and kept quiet.

“Let’s assume that Reina’s yet-to-be-discovered BMW was used to transport the body. We return to the original question: let’s think about why Reina, who went so far as to live in a ramshackle wooden apartment to conceal the fact that she had money, didn’t have a driver’s license and yet had a luxury car. It had to be because she drove celebs and guests from the secret club in the car and wouldn’t have been able to fool them if it wasn’t a high-end vehicle, right? Having a luxury car and Shota as her chauffeur were essential to her operation. However, owning a luxury car would damage the front she worked so hard to create. So obviously she tried to hide the fact that she owned a BMW as much as she could. That’s why she parked it at a lot half a mile from her apartment.”

His theory was convincing.

“The killer took advantage of this fact. He moved around in the BMW no one knew was hers, killed her, abandoned the body in the park, and then erased all traces connecting him to the crime before returning the car to its original location. He may have even removed evidence from her apartment linking Reina to the BMW to prevent the police from finding the car so quickly. He must’ve known that if he wrapped up everything before the police knew about the BMW, they wouldn’t ever realize it had been used to transport the body. However, things didn’t work out so neatly.”

It came to me, and I said, “The Mukojima police were already watching the parking lot.”

“Exactly. Whether he was shaken by the severed foot or through some negligent slip, Shota, who had been living with her and hiding the money, let the police in to the BMW early on. He was the driver, or possibly even the owner in name, so obviously he would’ve known about the car. The killer hadn’t been expecting that. Because the police were guarding the parking lot, the killer couldn’t return the BMW to its original location.

“So where is the BMW now? I’d guess he slipped it into a large parking garage to make it more difficult to find. But he only had a single day after he killed her, so he wouldn’t have been able to put together a real elaborate plan. If the police put enough manpower on it, they’ll turn up the car.”

“So if we locate the BMW...” I said.

Dr. Higano nodded and finished my sentence: “...It might have some evidence.”

But the woman quickly cut in. “So what you’re saying is you can’t find any evidence here, and you may not find any in the car either?”

Dr. Higano smiled wryly. He was trying to provoke Koichiro to force him to confess. The woman was clearly trying to prevent that with her quick response.

However, her efforts were fruitless; Koichiro was starting to react.

Dr. Higano pointed at Koichiro's pants pocket.

I'd also noticed that Koichiro had a hand in his pocket ever since we started talking about the car.

"If I am right, this will be a seriously lucky guess," Dr. Higano said. "One definite proof of a person's humanity is our inability to let something go or throw something away. We walk around with things because, irrationally, we think they're safer with us than somewhere else. So perhaps the killer still has it with him." He smiled. "The key to the BMW, that is."

Everyone noticed the obvious shift on Koichiro's face.

"Time for a body search," Yamaji said. He wrenched Reina's father up by the shoulders.

Koichiro's face had gone pale and he was soundlessly shaking his head. He fumbled in his pocket and placed something on the desk.

It was a car key.

When "Otoha" saw this, she quietly sighed in resignation.

No one could counter that.

Dr. Higano, the detective, had completely taken over.

He, too, sighed, and a concerned look appeared on his face. "As Ken said, the two of them really loved each other. Which is *exactly* why Reina went to such lengths to take her revenge...You get what I'm suggesting, right?" Dr. Higano's voice turned scolding. "That love was *forbidden*."

Ken stepped across the room. He walked unhurriedly, even relaxedly. His face was as emotionless as a ghost's, but in one fluid motion he grabbed the evidence bag off the desk near the door. We'd placed it there to gauge the reaction of the three men during their questioning.

Inside the bag was the knife.

Ken tore the bag and threw it away, brandishing the knife at Koichiro.

He slowly approached him. It all happened so suddenly. The look on Ken's face was completely unaligned with his actions, and in their confusion no one was able to react right away.

"This man," Ken said, his dead face starting to pour out globs of sweat. "He shouldn't be alive."

Ken's threat snapped me out of my daze.

We had to stop him.

But the knife had me frozen. I wasn't used to the rough and tumble like Yamaji was, and I instinctually turned to him, counting on him to do something.

"Ah!" When I saw Yamaji I realized his face was full of scorn for Koichiro.

Yamaji and his warped sense of justice had no intention of getting in Ken's way as he meted punishment out on this awful man.

"This man...is just an animal." Ken's voice was shaking. His face had stiffened into a crude contortion. He looked more disturbed than angry. He wasn't used to sharing his emotions; he was unable to express them clearly.

But I'd never seen such rage before.

To cut to the chase, it all ended quickly without Yamaji even having to get involved. Ken stood there heaving breaths, unable to move, the knife trembling in his hand until he released it and let it fall to the ground. He froze, hopeless and exhausted, and let his head hang down.

Koichiro stared at the blade of the knife on the ground and suddenly cried out:

"Reina's scheme!

"Forbidden!

"Just an animal!"

He was spitting back the phrases people had used about him. "I see." He

covered his face with his hands. "I see. So that's what it was."

For a moment he remained with his hands over his face. He dug his fingers into his skin with immense pressure. It was as though he was trying to crush his own head with all the force he had.

Then he took his hands away.

"Whew," he sighed.

The face revealed under the hands was as expressionless as a Noh mask. He didn't seem quite human.

"Ken," he said and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You called me an animal. Do you think that's true?"

Ken opened his eyes wide and lifted his head to look at Koichiro, who said, "I mean, children are the property of their parents, aren't they?"

Brutal.

Words like that would've enraged anyone.

Koichiro was starting to realize that himself. His own brutal statement was also a declaration that he no longer had anything to hide.

No one responded. We all wanted to hear whatever else it was this poker-faced man had to say.

Still expressionless, Koichiro slowly turned, looking at each one of us observing him, and then continued in his detached manner.

"I had sex with Reina. Often. But what does it matter? She loved me, she wanted the pleasure. We weren't related, so ethically there was nothing wrong with it either. You can't criticize me for it. Actually, Reina loved me and was trying to avenge me, even after we got physical."

He shook his head.

"However, Reina betrayed me. She got pregnant with my child and tried to keep it."

The tone in his voice made it sound like he had no responsibility for what happened.

“I’m a politician. If the world learned that my adopted daughter had my child, I’d lose everything in an instant. Even if we managed to raise the kid in secret, there’d always be damning proof right there—living with us. It would be like living with a bomb. I wouldn’t have been able to put up with it. I persuaded Reina to have an abortion, I thought she’d agreed. But in the end she wasn’t convinced. She threatened to go public with the fact that I’d impregnated her. She had the irrefutable evidence of DNA test results, too.

“I was confused. Her behavior was bizarre. When I asked her if she wanted me to lose my job, she said she didn’t care because she’d raise the kid herself, she had that much money. Obviously, money wasn’t the problem for me. But I couldn’t handle being gossiped about, while she lived off the profits of her shady activities. There was only one solution.”

Koichiro paused.

“I had to kill her.”

I could understand every word he said.

But I was utterly unconvinced.

“Why did you use such a violent method?” I asked. “You inflicted so much pain on your own daughter.”

He responded as though it were obvious: “Because there’s no way in hell you’d ever think a parent was capable of doing something so cruel.”

Someone screamed.

Ken was yelling and tears were rolling off his face down to the floor.

Koichiro looked over at Ken. There was the slightest shift in his previously expressionless face, but I caught it.

Koichiro smiled, as though he were happy.

I had to get out of here.

“Koichiro Myoko,” Yamaji said in a clinically neutral tone. “You’re under arrest for murder.” But he couldn’t hide the anger on his face as he put Koichiro in cuffs.

When I looked at Koichiro, an expression almost of relief floated across his features. And at this point, I wanted to abandon thinking any further of this case.

However...

I took a covert glimpse at Dr. Higano.

Ahh!

He'd let down his guard for a moment.

Seiren Higano was toying with the glass cube puzzle he'd broken. He seemed almost...morose, an expression he'd never revealed before.

—

And I still hadn't forgotten what he had said when I first asked him, "Have you identified a suspect?"

Epilogue

After all was said and done, it only took one day to arrest the killer.

The following day, we restarted our investigation with Koichiro Myoko as our primary suspect. He seemed to have no interest whatsoever in denying what he'd done, so it was almost too easy to assemble a case against him. However, I still got an email from Yamaji bitching about Koichiro's lack of remorse.

The media went wild as well.

An incumbent member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly had killed his beautiful, mysterious adopted daughter in a copycat crime imitating the serial killer Masquerade. That was more than enough to whet the public's appetite. No photos of Reina had turned up yet, but that didn't matter for the public's interest in the case. Conversely, everyone who'd known her said she was beautiful, which only stirred everyone up and hyped the media up even more. Television news covered the case relentlessly.

News of their physical relationship hadn't leaked yet, but given the intensity of the coverage, it was only a matter of time until someone sniffed it out. Of course, I felt like it would've been best for my old classmate's sake if no one ever learned the truth.

After the arrest, Section Chief Otawara gave me two days off as an acknowledgement of my hard work. The day after we caught Koichiro (which was, technically, just later the same day) I was totally beat, so the only thing I felt capable of was passing out in my room.

However, there was something I had to take care of.

So the day after the arrest, I took my trusty bike out for a spin at noon. I didn't feel like going straight to my destination, so at first I cycled randomly along Odaiba's coast. Odaiba had become one of the leading tourist destinations in the world, and the artificial parks filling the manmade island, funded by casino-derived tax revenues, were designed for maximum architectural, environmental, and psychological pleasure. Next to these unnatural displays of nature sprawled the sparkling casino hotels, which went beyond bad taste. There were no words to describe

their level of kitsch and gaudiness. Their maws seemed to gape open and swallow up all those who gave into their desires. Fortunately for public workers like us, it was these gambling machines, which blessed the lives of some and destroyed others, that paid our salaries.

And somewhere in this warped idea of a town lived my adversary, a serial killer.

As I rode my bike, I saw news vans double parked all over the place, covering the murder. I couldn't help but be reminded of the fevered coverage of my own sister's murder. I couldn't even spare any sympathy for the press guys hurriedly lugging cameras around.

Please, I thought, use your freedom as the press to save as many people as you can, instead of hurting anyone.

Despite my lengthy detour, I still managed to arrive at my destination precisely at 2:00 P.M., the time I had pre-arranged. Foreign pines lined the front of the pleasant wooden building.

The psychiatry clinic that looked like a café.

Also known as the detective agency without a sign.

I rang the bell next to the copper door, and someone quickly opened it. It was the cute woman whose dyed brown hair was put up into a bun.

“Hello there,” she said. “All by yourself today?”

Erika Shirasu looked around with her big, smiling eyes and moved her whole body exaggeratedly, checking to see whether I was alone. The superfluous thought came to me that this over-the-top attitude was perhaps a method she'd developed to win over the opposite sex.

“It's, uhh, kinda non-work related...”

I found myself trailing off the end of my sentence; her effusive femininity always brought out my inferiority complex.

“Oh, non-work related? You're meeting Dr. Higano for private reasons? Then maybe I should leave you two alone?”

“I'd...appreciate it if you wouldn't.”

She snickered. “I’m joking. Please, come in. I’ll make coffee.”

Erika held open the door with her right hand and beckoned me in.

“Thanks...I thought that the clinic was closed today. You don’t have the day off?”

“It is closed. But the detective agency is basically open 24/7.”

“Do you help out with that as well?”

“No, no. As if. Dr. Higano’s around, so I’m just taking a break here. He said it was ok for me to use this place as I would a café.”

Erika walked behind reception with as much assurance as though she owned the place. She quickly took out coffee cups and put the water on boil. “I’m pretty particular about the temperature of the water when I do a pour over. The correct temperature varies depending on the degree to which the beans are roasted. These beans are medium, so 183 to 186 degrees would be an orthodox temperature.” She continued her coffee talk in a sing-song voice, evidently not caring if I was listening or not.

“Umm,” I said.

I didn’t really need to ask the question I was about to ask. And if I bungled it, Erika might start keeping her eye on me.

But I couldn’t keep myself quiet. I had a surprising need to make sure everything was black or white.

Erika had her back to me, so I went ahead and asked, “You’re Noi-tan, right?”

She paused, holding the drip kettle mid-air. She turned to me with a serious look I’d never seen her make before and stared at me for a second.

But then she said “What do you mean?” and tilted her head cutely as always.

—

Erika said she had a date with her boyfriend (so she actually had one!), and headed out soon after she finished making coffee. I honestly couldn’t

tell from the vague look on her face whether she was leaving to get away from the investigation or to give me time to be alone with Dr. Higano.

After she left, I watched the ceiling fan spin round as I sipped my coffee. I felt bad, but the coffee Erika had made so carefully only tasted bitter to me. I alternated between taking sips of it and sighing.

Was I confident enough?

I'd probably say something ridiculous and disappoint him.

"Yuri, please come in."

Dr. Higano called for me, but it took me a second to muster up my courage and stand up from the leaf-green sofa.

I knocked on the door and went into his office. I noticed all of his things: shelves of academic tomes, the SLR camera, his puzzle, a coffee mill, and a can of coffee beans. The monotone room hadn't changed from when I visited the day before yesterday. The only difference was that today Dr. Higano was sitting at his black desk in his Armani suit, without his white coat.

"You wanted to talk to me about Masquerade?"

Dr. Higano looked up from the medical records on his desk and smiled at me.

He gestured for me to sit on the white leather sofa. I realized I'd balled my fists up without knowing it. I slowly, carefully opened them, like I was solving one of the puzzle cubes on his shelf.

I got straight to the point. "Yes. But before that, there's something I wanted to confirm with you."

"Hmm," Dr. Higano sounded focused, but he also seemed to be trying to guess what I was about to say.

I took a deep breath. I had no idea what would happen once I said my piece. I was aware that everything I'd gone to the trouble of building up might come toppling down.

However, I wanted to know the truth.

—

“Koichiro Myoko wasn’t the killer...right?”

—

“Right,” Dr. Higano admitted, almost too readily. “That’s correct. Do you mind if I ask how you arrived at that conclusion?”

“Do you remember how you responded when I asked you, here in this room, whether you’d identified a suspect?”

Dr. Higano just smiled and didn’t respond.

“You said, ‘Yes, I’m going to pin it on her father.’”

Dr. Higano looked at me with curiosity in his blue eyes.

“I don’t know if you were serious or joking. But at any rate, when you said that, I started to rethink everything Koichiro had said and done.”

My mouth was getting parched. *Now* I could’ve used some coffee, but I’d left the coffee Erika had made for me in the waiting room.

“Before Koichiro confessed, he went into that rage against Ken. He thought Ken had been irresponsible as a fiancé. He yelled at both of them and asked which one had impregnated his daughter. That felt a little strange to me. If her pregnancy was his motive as he later confessed, then that incredibly real anger would all have had to be an act.”

Dr. Higano nodded, encouraging me to continue.

“And there was absolutely no need at all for him to lie like that. On the contrary, he was just tightening his own noose...So I started thinking about that contradiction, and here’s how I explained it.”

I readied myself to deliver.

“Koichiro didn’t actually know that Reina was carrying his child.”

Dr. Higano nodded deeply. “Yes, he first learned it was his child only as he heard my theory.”

I was relieved my hunch was correct.

“But I’m lost after that,” I admitted. “I don’t know how you figured out it was him and then cornered him. I have no idea why Koichiro accepted a false theory and then confessed to being the killer.”

What’s more, he even had the definitive piece of evidence—the BMW key. The circumstances seemed all just a little too convenient for the case Dr. Higano was making.

“Hmm.” Dr. Higano put a hand to his jaw in thought. “I see. To make this explanation simpler, let me ask you a question: Who do you think is the real killer?”

“Umm.” I thought hard. There were a few people I suspected. But the name that came to mind was a little off base.

“I think it’s Masquerade.”

I immediately regretted saying it.

And it should be obvious why. Since the crime, there had been absolutely no evidence suggesting Masquerade was the killer. Even I knew that my theory required some intense leaps in logic.

Nevertheless, even after all that had happened, I *still* couldn’t shake my initial impression of the criminal profile.

I knew Dr. Higano would probably sneer at me for continuing to insist that it was Masquerade so obsessively, without any factual basis.

“So I see,” he said, “you haven’t changed your stance at all.”

But when I dared to glance up, his face didn’t hold even a trace of disappointment.

Instead he looked at me intently, with great interest in his eyes.

Then his gaze moved to my right hand and lifted the edge of his mouth for the slightest instant.

“There was a trick to getting Koichiro to make that false confession.”

“A trick?” I asked.

“Yes. The trick was to indirectly communicate the identity and motive of

the real killer to Koichiro. Once he knew *that*, he had *no choice* but to identify himself as the killer.”

I was stunned. I never would have guessed. “So if you know who the real killer is, his reasoning makes more sense?”

“I believe so.”

“Dr. Higano, please, tell me the truth!” I raised my voice.

In response, Dr. Higano drew his lips together and became silent. After a moment, he slowly stood from his Aeron chair and took something from his black shelves.

It was the remains of the glass cube puzzle he had destroyed.

“I’ve been involved in many different cases as a detective. And thanks to that experience, there’s a conclusion I’ve come to. It’s one that you’ve heard me say a number of times now.” Dr. Higano seemed to be enjoying the feeling of the broken cubes as he played with them in his hands. “*The truth has very little value.*”

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“The truth is sometimes cruel. When it’s cruel, it’s best to cover it up with white lies. It’s best to manufacture something beautiful. That’s what I believe.”

“I disagree,” I said, in clear opposition to him.

I respected Dr. Higano, but I just could not accept this.

But Dr. Higano didn’t budge. “Reina risked her life in pursuit of the truth,” he said. “Do you still feel that way even after all her great work came to nothing?”

“What?”

He lowered his eyes to the glass blocks.

“Once you destroy the fiction, it’s like this broken puzzle. You can never put it back together again. It’s all for nothing. It’s just a shell without a fragment of beauty. Yet you still want to expose the truth? Are you really

prepared for that?”

I opened my eyes wide.

Because Dr. Higano wouldn't have made up a killer without any reason. He must've had a reason why he thought he had to. And that reason was something important enough to choose to falsely charge Koichiro.

Once I heard the truth, I could never go back. Once I knew the real killer, I wouldn't be able to feign ignorance. This was my only chance to retreat.

“Tell me,” I said, without any hesitation.

Dr. Higano closed his eyes and nodded deeply.

Then he opened them and told the truth:

—

“The real killer is Reina Myoko herself. Her death was a suicide.”

—

My breath caught.

I felt dizzy.

I hadn't even considered that. Well, not really. I'd always suspected that Reina was somehow involved with the case. I had considered the possibility of her suicide, although only vaguely.

However, having someone say it out loud like this surprised me. It made me want to scratch my head in disbelief.

“I...don't understand. Why did she have to commit suicide?”

“Revenge...I think.”

“Revenge...Revenge for Koichiro?”

“The other way around. Taking revenge *against* Koichiro.”

I put my hands on my head, unable to process everything. “I thought Reina was still trying to *avenge* Koichiro. And now suddenly she hates

him so much that she reverses her plan?”

“I think the abortion was the turning point. Reina had a warped love for Koichiro. But when she got pregnant and realized she had to have an abortion, she had to snap out of her denial. The sad reality that she couldn’t have the child of the person she loved—that it had to be killed. Why was that the ultimate result of this love? She must’ve thought deeply about that. And that’s when she realized.” Dr. Higano shook his head regretfully. “What her father expressed toward her wasn’t love but desire.”

Hearing this, I remembered how Koichiro described Reina during the first questioning: Snow White.

Yes. Though that Koichiro was Reina’s father, he hadn’t ever seen who she was.

“It’s not surprising. Warped love is warped, after all, and can easily transform into hatred.”

He was completely right. Of course, I hadn’t gone through any of this myself, but I could easily imagine that getting pregnant and having an abortion would change your values as a woman.

However...Was what he was saying really true?

The image of Reina in the ever-amber classroom twilight flashed into the back of my mind.

“That’s why I wanted to rip it up.”

The girl who ripped up a book because the story was beautiful.

That’s what she meant.

Ahh...I finally understood.

“She...realized it...” She had been jealous of that beautiful story. “Yes... Reina knew for a long time,” I said. “She knew the relationship she had with her father was wrong! I think the abortion was obviously a shock. It makes sense that she hated her father for that.”

In my mind’s eye, the shredded pages of the book fluttered like flower

petals in the twilight.

“But Reina was sharp. She had to know there wouldn’t be a happy ending. There’s no way she wouldn’t have been prepared for it...So why did she choose such an extreme solution?”

“So Reina showed this kind of attitude since high school?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Higano said, “Hmm,” and crossed his arms, as though surprised by that. He leaned back into his chair for a moment.

“That woman who claimed she was Otoha Tamachi in the lobby of the business hotel,” he said, putting a hand to his jaw. “She said that since she was a schoolgirl, Reina had dated lots of guys. I deduced she was trying to influence me into thinking it was only natural for Reina to date many men for her—that is, Otoha’s—own convenience. But now that you’re suggesting that Reina realized the relationship with her father was wrong, I think we can safely say that what Otoha told us was clearly the truth. Maybe she was dating so many people to experiment?”

“Experiment?”

“Yes, she was experimenting and exploring, to see if she could love someone other than her father. And if she found someone, she planned to end her relationship with her father...However, from what we’ve seen, her experiment seems to have ended in failure.”

“In the end, Reina could only love her father?”

“Yes. Shota and Ken were among the failures. However, her feelings of guilt must’ve continued to grow even though she couldn’t love anyone other than him. We can assume that dark thoughts built inside her as the unhealthy relationship with her father continued. The feelings that stagnated inside her became a spark for revenge, and it was only a matter of time until there was an explosion. Then that explosion finally came.”

“That was the pregnancy and abortion...”

Dr. Higano nodded silently.

Just as a newly hatched chick becomes attached to the first thing it sees, Reina loved her father. There was no escaping from what had been imprinted upon you.

“It’s awful. That terrible man considered children as *property*. He manipulated Reina and destroyed her life.”

“Hmm. Let me clear up one misunderstanding—those weren’t Koichiro’s true feelings. He was only saying those awful things to pretend to be a deranged killer.”

“What?”

But after I thought about it, it was the obvious course of action. Once he gave the false motive, he was pretending to be the killer.

Still, I bit my lip and shook my head. “I don’t get it...Why would he do that?!”

“You don’t? You’re always so clever...You should understand by now.”

Ah.

I did understand.

I *wanted* Koichiro to be an unforgivable animal.

Otherwise there’d be no outlet for my emotions in such a brutal case.

I wanted to run down a wicked enemy to bring him to justice. I wanted—no, we all wanted a neat story like that.

But that story had fallen apart.

And it had fallen apart because I alone had sought the truth. Like the broken pieces of the puzzle on the table.

“Yuri, you must’ve realized the truth about this case by now, haven’t you?”

It took me a moment, but I said, “Yes.” I clenched my teeth. “Reina took her revenge by committing suicide and making Koichiro look guilty.”

Dr. Higano nodded.

“Yes. And when Koichiro learned the truth, he fulfilled his daughter’s request. He confessed and sacrificed his own life so that his daughter’s plan for revenge would go exactly as she had hoped.”

Koichiro realized the intention behind Reina’s suicide after Dr. Higano’s suggestive phrases:

—

“Which is exactly why Reina went to such lengths to take her revenge.”

—

“That love was forbidden.”

—

And when Ken called him “an animal.”

—

Dr. Higano had probably given him a clue when he spoke with him alone at the business hotel, too. Koichiro transformed, behaved as poorly as he could, and began to show off his faults to help complete Reina’s plan.

All for his daughter.

So that his daughter’s desires weren’t for naught.

Generally speaking, then, Koichiro was an awful person. It was clear that he deceived his daughter and raped her. But he wasn’t all evil. Part of him sympathized with his daughter. It wasn’t all lust; there was love, somewhere.

Dr. Higano was right. The meticulous plan Reina had so painstakingly built had crumbled apart. It crashed down, a disappointing failure.

“Yuri.” Dr. Higano picked up a few of the glass blocks and clattered them in front of me. “This is what the pursuit of truth is.”

I finally realized what he meant.

“But there’s still time,” he said. “Avert your eyes from the truth, cover your ears, and you can still carry out Reina’s plan. Her true wish can still be fulfilled.”

That would’ve been best. Leave things as they were and send Koichiro Myoko to jail, a supervillain, all according to Reina’s plan. That would be a fitting end for her story.

After all, if the world knew the truth, no one would be any better off. If the truth came out, Reina would have killed herself for no reason. Even if Koichiro escaped false charges, he would still be ostracized. Ken’s anger would have no outlet and he’d be left alone with hideous thoughts. On top of that, within the force, Yamaji and I would both be criticized, and I’d likely encounter more obstacles preventing me from capturing Masquerade.

Not a single good thing would happen if the truth came to light.

But I...

“Dr. Higano, you always say ‘The truth has very little value,’” I said. “But I’m not convinced. I used to believe the truth alone would save us. But...I was wrong. The truth is just the truth; it is not kind, nor is it right. That’s what this case made me realize. I’m sure you’ve suffered through the same thing a number of times...But...” I clenched my hands into fists. “But if we don’t seek out the truth...”

From the beginning I only ever had one goal.

“...We’ll never take down Masquerade.”

The murderer who had killed my sister was a seemingly impossible criminal in today’s world. Despite the mountains of evidence he left behind, we could find no traces of him. He’d transcended reality, transcended substance, had turned into an illusory urban legend. And somehow he had managed to charm everyone by combining the malevolence of murder with his beautiful aesthetic.

Masquerade was a fiction inside a fiction.

The only way to drag him out from within that fabrication was to follow

the truth to its very end. Masquerade was undefeated in a world woven with lies—a stage built for him to dance about freely and madly.

Only with the truth could we hunt him down.

I knew this instinctively.

So despite the fact that Reina had gambled her life with her plan, I resolved to seek the truth no matter what truth of my own awaited me. Without that attitude, I, too, might be swallowed up by Masquerade's lies.

I alone refused to dance in his world.

Also, I was certain of one thing when it came to Reina's plan for revenge.

Her decision to use suicide as a means for revenge was *absolutely* a mistake.

So I chose to let Reina's decision to gamble her life for revenge go to waste.

It would amount to nothing.

With my own arrogant sense of justice, I destroyed and denied what she had carefully built.

I knew Dr. Higano was probably disappointed in my decision, in my naïve sense of justice. Now he'd really hold me completely in contempt.

But his expression told a different story.

"I'm impressed," he said.

He was speaking honestly, not sarcastically. His blue eyes were wide open and glistening with excitement.

"You'll only ever catch Masquerade if you continue your hunt for the truth. Ahh, you are absolutely right."

Dr. Higano stood and, incredibly, kneeled before me. He took my right hand as though I was a queen.

"Your hand is beautiful," he said reverently. "And the faithfulness of your heart even more so."

His sweet words and the way he gently held my hand made me blush.

“Which is why I’m sure.” Dr. Higano stroked the back of my hand with his fingers. “Masquerade will come for you at some point to take your right hand.”

A chill ran down my spine.

I couldn’t escape the feeling that what he said was completely true.

“And when that happens, I don’t know what the outcome will be. I don’t know whether you will end up a victim—or whether you’ll be able to expose the truth and catch the serial killer. However, I choose to believe that you are the special person who will take down Masquerade.”

He released my right hand and whispered, in his deep voice, “*You are already his archrival.*”

Why?

For him to encourage me so honestly was the highest of compliments—yet my body was trembling with a fear that had risen from somewhere inside me.

Dr. Higano left the room and before long, returned with coffee for two.

I watched Dr. Higano sit in his Aeron chair before I sipped my coffee.

His pale, well-balanced face now showed no trace of the excitement he’d displayed only a moment ago. I couldn’t detect any emotion behind his usual perfect, mannequin-like smile.

I took a gulp of coffee.

I was surprised. The coffee Erika had made was excellent, but Dr. Higano’s was a level above even that. I’d heard the word “fruity” used to describe coffee before, but now I realized for the first time what it signified. The coffee had a fruity drinkability and pleasant acidity.

I finished the cup before I knew it.

“I feel like I finally get why coffee is so delicious.”

“Yes!” Dr. Higano nodded contentedly. “With coffee, you want to enjoy

the acidity.”

This coffee talk was entirely beside the point. We still had a lot to discuss. I coughed and stared straight at him.

“Doctor, you’ve convinced me of the reason Reina committed suicide, but we haven’t talked about the trick she pulled off.”

“Yes.”

“So...Her severed foot was in her apartment. The knife that killed her was also there. If Reina’s death was suicide, she had to have done it in her apartment, right? And if that’s the case, we have the new problem of determining who took her body to Odaiba.”

“Yes. However, that question is quite easy to answer,” Dr. Higano said. “She took her own body.”

“Excuse me?”

“To be more accurate, she just took her own car there.”

I was completely lost in thought. I pressed the corners of my eyes with my fingers and asked, “So she died in the park?”

“Exactly.”

“No, no, that’s impossible. Her foot was cut off in her apartment! The murder weapon was there!”

But Dr. Higano didn’t flinch. “The knife was mass-produced. You could buy it anywhere. And the BMW was an automatic.”

Confused, I racked my brain and tried to come to grips with what the doctor was saying.

To sum it up, then: Reina had killed herself in the park to try to frame Koichiro. However, her severed foot had been left in her apartment. As was the knife covered with blood—blood from her chest. But it is possible she had another similar knife prepared. Then, according to Dr. Higano, Reina drove herself to Odaiba in the BMW.

“Ah.” I understood what Dr. Higano was trying to say.

But it couldn't be true.

Because this wasn't something a normal person would ever do. Even just thinking about the implications made my entire body freeze with fear at how insane it was.

"Dr. Higano, I think I know what you think happened," I said, my voice quivering. "Reina cut off *her own foot*, left it in her room, and drove herself to the bay with one foot."

I wanted for him to say no, but Dr. Higano nodded gently and said, "Yes."

My mind had taken in all it could, but he continued mercilessly.

"Furthermore, she purposefully made light cuts in her chest with the knife she had prepared and placed it in the room with her severed foot. Then she stopped the bleeding so she wouldn't pass out, gave herself anesthesia, and left the apartment in such a state as to make everyone think she had been murdered. She had plastic sheeting in the BMW seats so she wouldn't leave blood anywhere, and drove herself to the park in Odaiba using her remaining foot. She stabbed herself in the chest with an identical knife she had bought to make everyone mistakenly think the first knife was the original cause of death, and then she died."

I was frozen, but Dr. Higano continued his explanation.

"Before she carried out her plan, she tied herself up with rope and cuffed her own hands to leave signs that she had been bound. She also called Shota after she cut off her foot. We can assume that she weighted down the bloody sheet, the knife she stabbed herself with, and the smartphone that also would have been evidence, and threw them into the bay. We might find them if we search the shallows near the park."

"G-Give me a second to take this all in!"

"Of course."

I took deep breaths to slow my racing heart and gave myself vigorous slaps on the cheek to bring myself back to my senses.

“Phew...Ahh, so...But, in this case, Koichiro had the key to the BMW, right? Why was that?” Finally I had hit upon a good question.

“Yes. We can probably attribute that to Reina texting Koichiro and asking him to move the BMW that was near the park. He probably didn’t think twice about a request from his daughter, so he went to the park, got in the BMW, and drove it away. By then it was dark, so he wouldn’t have noticed her body nearby. Reina likely planned to pin the crime on Koichiro as he returned the car by putting evidence in the trunk of the BMW—maybe one of the murder weapons—that would mislead police into thinking he was the killer. Doesn’t that make sense?”

“So Koichiro didn’t return the car because the cops had the parking lot staked out?”

“Yes. Although he didn’t know about the incident yet, he probably instinctively ran off when he saw the police. Then after they found her body, he must’ve thought he was being framed by the killer. So he didn’t say anything about driving her car to avoid drawing any suspicion to himself.”

“That makes sense. So by that logic, Reina’s plans were messed—”

Wait a second.

I stopped in my tracks.

Reina cutting her own foot off was improbable enough on its own, but I remembered the severed foot wasn’t the only grotesque part of the mutilated corpse.

Her face had also been cut off with a hand plane or something.

Up until now I had naturally thought that Koichiro had done it. It was a brutal murder, but we thought he’d tried to copycat Masquerade, so the details of how the corpse was mutilated were convincing enough.

However, if Reina’s death was suicide, that changed dramatically.

“Did Reina...cut off her own face?”

Had she cut off her face with an electric planer or something while she

was still living?!

That was just out-of-your-mind ridiculous.

“That’s impossible,” I said.

Yes, it *was* ridiculous!

“*Totally* impossible. There’s something fishy about this ‘trick’! It’s nuts to think she drove after cutting off her foot, and even crazier that after that she wouldn’t have gone into shock halfway through trying to cut her own face off while she was *still alive*. This is just too much!”

Unthinkingly, I had raised my voice, and Dr. Higano tried to calm me down by nodding along with me in agreement.

“Of course, that’s a natural reaction to have.”

“Right?! So that means—”

“However,” Dr. Higano interrupted me. “This only proves my point. No one ever thought she cut off her own face. Anyone would reject the possibility as entirely too strange. Which is precisely why no one considered this case a suicide at first glance. Yes, this too was one of Reina’s misdirections.”

I was at a loss for words.

It couldn’t have been true. Was he suggesting that she was trying to plant a red herring for us by cutting off her own face?

“I can’t help but respect the lengths she was prepared to go to in order to execute her plan,” the doctor added. But he could probably tell that I wasn’t convinced, so he continued, “Yuri, do you remember the way Reina’s face had been cut off?”

What the hell was he getting at with this question?

I was still dazed, but eventually I shook my head quickly. The exposed bones and awful brutality of how her face had looked had been so horrible to look at that now, my mind couldn’t remember any of the details.

“Her face seemed to have been cut off, but actually everything from her

nose up was left more or less intact. That's because she still had things to do after she cut off her face. She had to get rid of the tool she used to cut her face—or maybe she threw it in the trunk to serve as evidence that Koichiro was the killer. She also had to get rid of the other evidence like her phone. She couldn't lose her eyes while she was cutting her face."

I couldn't keep up with what he was saying whatsoever. Nor was I able to accept it.

"B-But say this had all miraculously worked out and she was able to do everything you say she did? There's no way she planned this all out ahead of time! Nobody makes a plan they're not sure they'll be able to complete!...And there's no reason Reina would opt for such a torturous method. No matter how prepared she was for it, normally she'd never pull it off!"

I could feel my head getting dizzy from lack of oxygen after all my yelling. I collapsed onto the sofa and tried to get my ragged breathing under control.

"Normally, you say? But you must've felt it a number of times over the course of this investigation...You likely even thought it from the very beginning when you were in school, right?" Dr. Higano shut me up with a single sentence: "Reina Myoko was insane."

Ah.

That one explanation was more convincing than any of his most logical theories.

I could finally be convinced of her ridiculous trick. Indeed, for her, this entire bizarre production probably even seemed entirely natural.

Convinced, I had no retort for him. I was suddenly overcome with exhaustion.

"As for why she decided on this plan," Dr. Higano said, "I have my own opinion, although it's just a hypothesis."

"I'd love to hear it."

“As I mentioned earlier, I think Reina felt both love and hate for Koichiro. Don’t you think she must’ve wanted to test these two competing emotions to see which one was correct? If she couldn’t make it all the way through, then that couldn’t be helped, and she would have had to be satisfied with the limits of her persistence. So it must’ve been a difficult choice for her.”

That was a persuasive hypothesis.

But it just didn’t jive for me.

“Well...I knew her in high school and have a slightly different take.”

“Really. Please share.”

“Something came to me when you said she was insane. She’d never shown the cracks in her armor, and she lied at times to keep her self, and her true feelings, hidden. This was true when it came to me, her classmate, obviously, but even for the Bumblebees, too. I couldn’t understand why she did that. It didn’t look like she was having fun or enjoying herself. But through this case, I was able to see that she didn’t even reveal herself to Shota, Ken, and Koichiro, her lovers and her father, which led me to think this.”

I didn’t have any basis for it.

But I was certain of it.

“Hiding herself was the way she lived. She didn’t know any other way. And no reason she had would’ve convinced anyone.”

Miss Direction.

Without a doubt, Reina had lived a life fitting of that name.

And now we’d seen the result.

“I finally understand why she chose such a convoluted suicide,” I said.
“That was just her nature.”

—

I sat on my bike and looked up at the sky. The stars in the ultramarine

night were blotted out by the casinos' gaudy neon light.

I really hate this town, I thought to myself.

It was still oppressively hot, so I put up my hair in a scrunchie. My mind was mush, like jam that had been simmered down to pulp.

My emotions were still bottled up and I didn't feel like sitting, so I pedaled standing up as I cut through buildings that were under construction.

"Huff...huff...huff..."

I panted as I pedaled.

By the end of our conversation, I hadn't been able to bring up the most important thing with Dr. Higano. But I couldn't help it. My theory was just too absurd—even delusional—to share with anyone, even the doctor.

But I'd become obsessed with my delusional theory since I'd first thought of it.

I arrived at the Hard King Hotel. It had been modeled on a royal palace, and flashed with blue and orange lights. My old-fashioned bike didn't match the decor, but I put it in the parking lot anyway. I felt pretty out of place myself as I walked in, following the seemingly never-ending red carpet, and finally made it inside the casino. The interior was nothing short of dazzling. A massive chandelier hung down from the high ceiling. But strangely, most of the customers looked pretty rough.

I faced the location we'd set up beforehand: the slots farthest to the left from the entrance. Electronic sounds cascaded in the air around the slots area, where everyone sat riveted in front of the simple matching games, their eyes reflecting the screens. No one paid me any attention.

I made my way over to a machine on the far left.

A beautiful woman was sitting there.

I didn't know whether I was lucky or whether she had been saving the seat, but the machine to her right was open so I sat down.

Miraculously, she had agreed to meet me here. I called out her name, or

more accurately, the only name I knew to call her by—“Otoha Tamachi.”

She looked over at me and smiled. “How are you, Yuri?”

Today “Otoha” had matched her outfit with the casino venue: she was wearing a formal, bright red dress slit up the leg, and stiletto pumps. Her makeup was different as well. Her lips were bright red, her gold eye shadow had glints of lamé, and her eyelashes were thick and prominent with mascara. She looked like a foreign celebrity; any trace of the demure princess from the day before yesterday was gone. You could’ve convinced me she was an entirely different person.

Nevertheless, the word that rose to the tip of my tongue didn’t change:

Beautiful.

“I wasn’t certain you’d actually meet with me,” I began.

“Haha. Relax, you don’t have to speak so formally.”

“Thank you, but I feel more comfortable this way.”

I didn’t think I could speak more casually to a woman whose true identity I didn’t know.

“I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule for me today. But what I’d like to talk about is so absurd I won’t be surprised if you laugh at me. My apologies in advance, but please hear me out.”

The woman looked at me inquisitively.

“I want to lay out a hypothesis I have. I’ll provide each and every piece of support that forms the basis for this crazy idea.”

The woman brushed her long hair aside and turned her whole body toward me.

I sighed deeply, gathered my breath, and then began to lay out my case:

- Reina was extremely meticulous. She never let her boyfriend or her fiancé take pictures of her, and when her father sold the house, she threw out all her old photos, too.
- After she had supposedly died, a coworker spotted Reina in her

red BMW.

- From high school onward, Reina used her beauty as a misdirection—despite her beauty, the way she looked was actually surprisingly forgettable.
- Her apartment was almost impossibly absent of any personality.
- Koichiro relied on psychoactive drugs after his wife's death, yet he was still so disturbed that he became physically intimate with his daughter.
- Koichiro was completely unaware of Reina's boyfriend, Shota.
- Reina's fiancé, father, and boyfriend all had completely different impressions of her: ice sculpture, Snow White, and motherly.
- Despite this, when Ken and Koichiro saw you, they both said you not only looked like Reina but gave off the same impression as her.
- All of the Bumblebees, including Otoha Tamachi, went missing at the same time.
- At right around the same time, Reina and Koichiro had been estranged for three years, when she was 18 to 21.

The woman laughed and shook her head. "I think I know what this crazy idea of yours is."

"I have more support. Please listen."

- The face of the corpse couldn't be identified because it had been cut off.
- Reina and Koichiro aren't biologically related, so not even a DNA test could prove whether the body was his daughter.
- The dental records used to ID the body were from when she was 21, *after* all the Bumblebees went missing.
- Shota was almost disturbingly devoted to Reina.
- Shota drank the entire energy drink even after he realized it had cyanide in it.

- Reina might've had others devoted to her. And while she was at Junseiwa Academy, the Bumblebees followed her around so closely it was unnatural.

I had dumped out everything I wanted to say. I realized my heart was throbbing heavily and pressed my hands against my chest. The cacophony around us completely faded from my hearing.

The woman was unfazed. She only looked at me with an unconcerned expression. It wasn't possible to get a read on what she was feeling based on her facial expressions; Dr. Higano had said she was exceptionally skilled at lying.

"There's a conversation I had with Reina while we were at Junseiwa Academy that I remember vividly," I added.

—

"It's a technique used in a sleight of hand trick. It means 'to shift the focus of the audience.' By getting the audience's attention with an exaggerated gesture or something, you conceal from them the most important part of the trick...But I think it's not just for sleight of hand tricks, don't you think? It happens all the time in reality. People miss the most important thing because there's something flashy right in front of them."

—

I shared the conversation Reina and I had in the evening light of the high school classroom.

"What was the flashy thing that served as a misdirection in this case? The gruesome corpse without a face and foot? The father getting involved with his daughter and being accused of her murder? Reina's insane suicide? There were too many for me to pick just one." My hands were damp with sweat. "But I did figure out what she was hiding."

The one thing I'd uncovered was what Miss Direction herself was hiding.

“It’s just one simple fact,” I said. “Reina Myoko is *still* alive.”

The woman was silenced.

Assuming my crazy theory was correct, I had thought this would throw off even “Otoha.” Unless she was so good at lying she was able to maintain her cool facade.

However, she didn’t react in either way I had expected. She stared at me, her girlish eyes flashing, playfully waiting for what I was going to say next.

So *this* was how she behaved in this kind of situation.

It was frightening.

I desperately tried to conceal my emotions and continued.

“The Bumblebees were her devotees, and even after they graduated she held sway over them. Reina had an idea. She suggested that they all become Reina Myoko. Otoha Tamachi, Miyuki Yata, Sena Hagawa, Asami Ino, and Ryoko Omura all disappeared themselves and lived their lives entirely as Reina Myoko. They overwrote their personalities, mannerisms, and even values with those of Reina so they could become her. It’s already clear from what Shota told us that they would be able to do this. They probably had cosmetic surgery and body reconstruction so people wouldn’t recognize them in close proximity. I think they even produced paperwork so they could go to the dentist as Reina.

“Reina and the Bumblebees then set about on her plan for revenge—revenge against Koichiro who had targeted her with his desire. Reina and the Bumblebees divided up the responsibilities and took them on. We were only able to investigate you and the woman who was the corpse, but the others must’ve contributed as well. I’m sure there were many men you all seduced in addition to Ken and Shota who just didn’t come up during the investigation. However, based on what I can tell from the situation so far, you operated behind the scenes with Shota at the casinos and in the secret club. The woman responsible for Ken and Koichiro might’ve been the one who lived in the apartment and ended up playing the corpse.”

The woman looked straight at me.

“But this is where I get stuck. It’s hard to imagine Reina would go to such lengths just to take revenge on Koichiro. If Reina was only after revenge, she was clever enough to pull it off on her own without the Bumblebees.”

“I wonder,” the woman said, like she was talking about someone else. “If so, then why do you think Reina did all this?”

“Here’s what I think,” I said, and told her what I’d told Dr. Higano. “It was just her nature. It was just like her to resort to indecent choices to create a misdirection.”

“Her nature...” She opened her eyes wide and repeated the word, as though surprised by it. “That makes sense, her nature. Ha, what an interesting expression.”

I raised an eyebrow, not sure why she seemed so happy.

“Hey, maybe you know this already, but Reina had a real name.”

“A...real name?” I dug through my memories before replying. “The name her biological parents gave her before she was adopted by Koichiro?”

“Yes. So you did know. That was the real Reina’s true name.”

I tilted my head. Could you really call the name given to her on a whim by parents who gave her up her true name?

“But no one will ever know the name she was given previously. No one at the hospital or the adoption agency remembers it. Even her biological parents, who abandoned her and gave her that name so carelessly, don’t remember it.”

Reina must’ve tracked down her actual parents and met them.

“When you think about that,” the woman said and smiled, “Doesn’t it start to feel like Reina never even existed?”

I was silent, unsure of what she meant.

“Reina had to try and become herself ever since the moment she was born and her name was given up. She had to play the role of a character called Reina Myoko. Given this, the word ‘nature’ may be incredibly appropriate. But I’d use a different word.” She looked down. “It was Reina’s ‘fate.’”

I tried to stop my hand from shaking and think calmly.

Earlier the woman had said Reina had almost completed her plan for revenge.

She also said Reina was immortal.

Whether this case was a murder or a suicide, Reina had clearly died when it came to the letter of the law.

No one would ever be called Reina Myoko again.

However, what if—

What if that was exactly what Reina had wanted?

What if what she wanted to accomplish was to destroy that very name?

Then this case had to be—

—a nameless woman’s revenge against Reina Myoko.

—

“I’m about to head out.” The woman stood up and looked down at me. “I’ll tell you what...Your theory was pretty interesting. But unfortunately for you, it’s all just a hysterical delusion.”

She left me with that and turned to go.

“Please wait,” I said. “My theory was a little overbearing. I’m sure I made mistakes. But you’re suspected of a crime. You convinced Shota to kill himself. Before you met with us at the hotel, you met with Shota. That’s where you gave him the energy drink—you opened the lid and put the cyanide in it. I know I’m not just dreaming this up. And I know I’m going to arrest you!”

“I have no idea how you’re going to prove that, but good luck. I have no

plans to run or hide.”

I only realized it much later, but this was a lie. She ran, she hid. I wouldn't ever see her again.

“Are we done here?” she said, with her back still toward me.

“Let me ask one last thing,” I said, working up the mental courage. “Who are you?”

She answered quickly: “I'm Otoha Tamachi. I'm Miyuki Yata. I'm Sena Hagawa. I'm Asami Ino. I'm Ryoko Omura.”

As I was shaking my head, she added, “I'm Reina Myoko.”

I balled up my fists. “Yes!” I yelled. “You're Reina Myoko!” Tears began to well up in my eyes, but I kept on yelling. “And you'll never escape that fact, even if you're legally dead!”

Reina turned around, lowered her gaze, and stared at my clenched right hand.

“Your hand is beautiful,” she whispered and looked me in the eyes. She smiled gently. “It's strange. I'm still pleased that you called me Reina.”

Then she looked away and didn't turn back.

Epilogue II

Now we have a nameless existence.

Not a single person can see us.

Of course, we can't even see ourselves.

So.

As introduced in the beginning, this was a personal story based on the serial killer Seiren Higano's aesthetic.

Prologue I

As usual, Seiren Higano was in his carefully appointed, almost monotone office. His tall, slim figure was draped in an Armani suit, over which he wore his white doctor's coat. He was drinking coffee from beans he had ground himself. Next to his coffee cup was a glass cube puzzle.

However, the person on the sofa facing him was not someone ordinarily found in this office. At the very least, it was clear she hadn't come to see him as a patient.

She was a beautiful woman wearing a flashy, well-cut red dress. There was a beauty mark on her collarbone. But the eye was drawn to something else.

Ropes.

Her entire body was bound by ropes, robbing her of her freedom. Her arms were restrained behind the sofa, and she had a black blindfold over her eyes, so only her mouth could move freely.

But she was still beautiful. She'd been kidnapped and brutally restrained, yet there was nothing desperate or sad about the scene. Far from it—she exuded a raw sensuality. The ropes bound her long, white legs in a way that emphasized their elegant beauty. Her red dress, red nails, and red lipstick matched so perfectly, they raised the bondage to the level of art.

It was fascinating. Her lack of freedom almost seemed put on.

"The coffee smells nice," she said.

May 26th, 4:50 P.M. Higano had followed this beautiful woman, subdued her with pharmaceuticals while she was on her way home from a café, and abducted her in his car. He had bound her in the car and brought her to his office.

An experience like that would've made most people panic. However, her crystal clear voice was perfectly composed.

Higano checked his Scandinavian wall clock and saw that it was now past 5:30. He smiled.

“I put some coffee out for you right in front of you. Even if you can’t taste it, you’re welcome to enjoy how it smells.”

“Well, that is thoughtful of you. But I’d *really* like to try such fine coffee myself. If you don’t mind, could I have a taste?”

“You’re asking me to let you out, aren’t you?”

“No, I don’t mind trying it like this. Hold the cup and let me taste it.”

When Higano understood what she was saying, he nodded and stood, smiling. He took the coffee cup sitting in front of her and brought it to her lips.

“Mmm.” Her delicate throat moved as she swallowed.

Higano had given her the coffee slowly, but the black liquid spilled out from the side of her mouth. The effect was, however, not unpleasant at all. It was even a little erotic.

Higano took out a handkerchief and wiped her mouth.

Even under these circumstances, it was obvious she was trying to fluster the man in front of her. Higano fleetingly wondered whether she was trying to flirt her way out of trouble, but he quickly reconsidered.

This was probably just her nature.

She had the bad habit of always needing to charm people.

“It’s fantastic. This is a pour-over, right? I can tell that you’re particular about the entire process—the beans you use, how you roast them, how you grind them, how they bloom, and how to extract it.”⁵

—

So here’s my question: If you’re not a barista, then what exactly are you?”

“Seiren Higano,” he responded without hesitation, hiding nothing. “I’m a serial killer.”

The beautiful woman didn’t even flinch when he said “serial killer.”

“A serial killer...I never thought I’d come across someone in that line of work.”

“That’s what everyone says before I kill them.”

“Haha, I guess so. Well, Mr. Serial Killer, did someone hire you to kill me?”

“That would be a hit man. I’m a serial killer. Serial killers kill people because they want to.”

“I see, so that’s how you’re defining it. If that’s the case, why did you decide to kill me?”

“Basically, because your feet are incredibly beautiful.”

“Well, I’m truly honored. My feet are one of the few things I’m actually confident about.”

Her response was so elegant that if her hands and feet had been free, one would have imagined her curtsying with her skirt hems.

“Now, let me ask you a basic question,” Higano said. “What’s your name?”

The beautiful woman answered, “Reina Myoko.”

“You’re lying, right? You’re Asami Ino. You’re one of the Bumblebees that flits around with Reina.”

Though this one remark must have pierced to the center of everything she was, the woman was undaunted and said, “No, I’m Reina Myoko.”

Higano leaned back in his Aeron chair, looking with deep interest at the stoic woman.

“Fine, let’s change the subject. Let me explain the rules I use to kill people. I try to learn as much as I can about my target’s temperament. I wanted to find out more about you, but there were just too many things that I couldn’t understand without asking you directly.”

“Secrets only make a woman more alluring.”

“It pains me to diminish your allure, but I hope you’ll be willing to

cooperate as we identify your secrets, Asami.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t say anything about Asami Ino. Her existence has been eliminated. But why don’t we talk about the woman we all share—Reina Myoko?”

“Hmm.”

Higano was interested in Asami because until she met Reina Myoko, her life had been completely ordinary and utterly unremarkable.

Asami Ino. She was the second of three daughters born to a bureaucrat father and an IT entrepreneur mother. Economically, their lifestyle lacked for nothing. She entered Junseiwa Academy after middle school and met Reina. Her grades were above average when she started, but by the time she graduated she was at the top of the class. She was accepted into Keiryoku University along with Reina and the other Bumblebees, but after a year, she mysteriously vanished along with the rest of them.

“Understanding Reina is basically understanding you. I don’t mind starting from there.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

“But how well do you know Reina?”

“I know everything,” she said, confidently.

Higano crossed his arms. He knew that Reina and the Bumblebees had an unusual solidarity, but it could be beyond what he’d imagined.

“Well then,” he continued, “I’ll tell you what I know about Reina. From a young age, she was involved in some incredibly unfortunate incidents. At five she was kidnapped for ransom. At 14 she witnessed her classmate commit suicide. At 15 she lost her mother in an accident in Portugal. From age 16 onward she was involved with many different men, including her father. At 18, her father’s company went bankrupt, which put the family in dire economic straits and forced her to drop out of Keiryoku University. Then she spent three years estranged from her father. Not long after that, all news of you and the Bumblebees ceased entirely.”

“Now that’s impressive! Serial killers really do a lot of legwork!”

“I’m not sure your average serial killer would. It does help with the planning, but I don’t think it’s necessary. I moonlight as a detective, so that’s the only reason I can investigate this extensively.”

“A detective *and* serial killer! What a perfect combination. Now I get it. Without those abilities, you’d never’ve become Masquerade, killing over and over in Odaiba without being caught. Ahh. I’m so glad to find out that the only serial killer of these times is as intelligent as I’d imagined.”

“You’re too kind...I’m honored someone like you appreciates me.”

Higano and the beautiful woman flashed polished smiles at each other.

During their brief time together, Higano had discovered this woman was pleasant and on the same wavelength as he himself. It was exceedingly rare for him to find a woman he could talk to all day long.

But unfortunately he couldn’t spend all day with her because he would have to kill her in the next few minutes.

“All six of you—the five Bumblebees and Reina herself—were living as Reina Myoko. She lived a life that left the single impression of being beautiful. She suppressed as much of her individuality as she could and left not even a single photograph. Of the six, I was able to learn what four of you were doing through my investigation. The first got a job with a major corporation and was living as an ordinary office worker. The second was working as a secretary for a member of the House of Councilors in the Liberal Party of Japan.⁶ The third got a job with a casino management company and managed to earn over 100 million, although I don’t know exactly how. And the fourth—you—kept herself busy conspiring with Ken to involve his father Heiji in a scandal. And you were the one who showed up at Koichiro’s after three years, pretending to be his daughter. Out of all the Reina Myokos, you were remarkably capable and took care of some of the most critical points. You were so frighteningly talented you were actually able to replace Reina for even Koichiro. And while playing his daughter, you began a physical relationship with him and got pregnant.”

She probably hadn't expected him to find out so much. The usually talkative woman kept her mouth closed.

"I think your intense devotion to Reina is what made this possible...So now my question is simply, why?" Higano stared at her tightly sealed lips. "Why did you attempt to quit your role as Reina?" She was wearing a blindfold, so Higano couldn't see how she reacted. The beautiful woman was silent for a moment, and then asked, "How do you know that's what I was doing?"

"It's just a general assessment based on watching you for the past month. You wrote home and told them you're still alive, and asked them to send Asami Ino's ID. You're trying to break things off with Koichiro, and you just called off the engagement with Ken. You've also already decided to move to Shikoku. You're clearly wrapping up the you living as Reina and making preparations to return to being Asami Ino."

She sighed, unable to counter what he knew.

"However, the other Reinas realized you were acting suspiciously. As a result, they started trying to kill you."

Higano stood from his Aeron chair and approached the sofa. The woman didn't move as his footsteps drew nearer. He drew his index finger along her jaw and then tilted her head up toward him.

One cut along her throat was still healing.

"Looks like one of the men controlled by the Reinas cut you with a knife. He pretended to be a pervert with a hair fetish and attacked you. So even if he actually killed you and was caught by the police, they'd just think he was a pervert who messed up while trying to cut off some of your hair, and they wouldn't look into his background. This is beside the point, but I was the one who tackled the pervert and let you escape. Seems like you were able to get away before the police could take your account."

"You're too kind...I appreciate your assistance on that occasion. Thanks to your efforts I'll have the pleasure of being killed by a serial killer rather than a man pretending to be a pervert."

“Haha, that’s a good joke.”

“Hehe, isn’t it?”

The two chuckled together.

“But your behavior is a mystery to me. You all were pretending to be someone else, and I’m sure you got frustrated in such an oppressive environment. You must’ve wanted to quit or run away at times. But no one gave up. That’s how tight the bond was between the Reinas. So you must’ve known that they’d go after you when you tried to go back to being Asami Ino. Nevertheless, you still went through with your decision.” Then Higano asked gently, “What exactly motivated you to do that?”

The beautiful woman became quiet again. She sighed deeply before catching her breath and smiling.

“That’s my deepest, darkest secret.”

“Well then.”

“It’s buried so deeply inside myself that not even I have easy access to it. If you must know, you’ll have to pull it out and reveal it yourself. As both a serial killer and a detective, you must be skilled at prying into people, aren’t you?”

This was a challenge. Higano sat in his chair and leaned far back, crossing his arms.

“Mr. Detective, you already know that Koichiro and I had a relationship. A normal person would think that was an unbearable burden. But you don’t seem to think it was a potential motive.”

“Yes, I assumed that there was some reason that took priority. I’m sure of it.”

“You have frighteningly good intuition.”

Higano watched Reina Myoko giggle and was convinced that he wasn’t mistaken.

“Now, may I ask you a question?”

“Please do.”

Higano let out a gentle sigh and said, “You’re in love with Koichiro, aren’t you?”

The woman caught her breath.

But she only allowed the briefest moment to pass before responding, “Yes, I love him. I did in the past, I do now, and I will in the future...hehe, but it doesn’t seem like I’ll have much longer to love him.”

“Another joke.”

“No, I’m just being sarcastic, Mr. Serial Killer.”

“Well that’s...unfortunate.” Higano laughed. “Since you say you know everything about Reina, let me ask you this. Did she have a physical relationship with Koichiro before she created the Reinas?”

“Yes.”

“Was she also in love with Koichiro?”

“Yes. Reina loved Koichiro. She did in the past, she does now, and she will in the future.”

Higano picked up the glass cube puzzle from his black desk and began to spin the pieces in a compulsive way, unconsciously. Even so, he quickly finished the puzzle.

For him, solving a case was the same as spinning his puzzle.

Higano discovered the truth, unconsciously, almost compulsively.

Whether he wanted to or not, he had already exposed several truths. Indeed, these truths rather stripped themselves bare in front of Higano, revealing themselves automatically: truths you didn’t want to know, truths you shouldn’t know, and others that mustn’t be known. In his presence, the truth revealed its grotesque innards just as the women who met him wanted to show off what lay beneath the skirts they wore.

Yet truth really has no value.

Higano looked at the woman’s beautiful feet in their brand new pumps.

Whether or not he discovered Reina Myoko's secret, in the next few minutes he was going to remove the pumps, peel off her stockings, and then cut off her foot with a chainsaw.

However, if he wasn't able to discover her secret—he would feel awful.

Ah, yes. That awful feeling. Learning her secret might help him scheme to win over the police, but that would only be a bonus prize.

That biological revulsion. In the end, that sensation is what pressed Higano into action.

He closed his eyes, focused on physical sensations, and rubbed the angular corners of his puzzle. As he did, the most important piece of all the information he had gathered separated itself of its own accord and became entwined in the web he had cast in his mind.

“You said that Reina loved Koichiro...That she did in the past, does now, and will in the future.”

“Yes.”

“At what point did she fall in love with her father? Is that something you know?”

“Yes. She was in love with him for as long as she could remember.”

“So she basically loved him since the first time Koichiro held her.”

The beautiful woman nodded slightly.

Hearing this, Higano thought back on Reina's eventful past.

Reina was in love with her father for as long as she could remember.

That cast a different light on one incident from her past. Higano picked up his tablet and began to search through articles.

—

A Japanese tourist plunged to her death at the well-known Portuguese tourist destination Cabo da Roca. Yumi Myoko (39) died from the injuries sustained. Her daughter, who witnessed the accident, said her mother lost her balance and fell from the cliff as she was trying to take a

photograph. The daughter suffered intense psychological trauma and will undergo counseling.

It hadn't been a major accident, so there weren't any other articles detailing what exactly happened.

After he finished reading, Higano pulled up a photo of Reina's mother, Yumi, that he had found earlier.

He looked at it, opened his eyes wide, and then heaved a sigh.

He set down the completed cube puzzle.

The puzzle, once jumbled, was now connected. The picture he didn't want to see had emerged.

Again, the truth was grotesque and unseemly.

"This is merely my theory, but it's the truth."

"You sound like you know what you're talking about, I guess."

Higano didn't flinch at the woman's intense sarcasm.

"Reina was sexually attracted to her father from a young age. Why she fell in love with him, I have no idea. Even if she herself had a reason in mind, she didn't know the real cause. The truth was clearly just that she had been in love with her father from a young age."

"Yes, that's right. However, love isn't something that happens without a reason, is it?"

"I'm not criticizing the form their love took. I agree that even the slightest thing can cause someone to fall in love...However, while Reina held onto a love that was forbidden love for a daughter, Koichiro was a normal father. He loved her as a daughter, not as a woman, and he wasn't going to budge. So naturally her feelings would be unrequited."

Higano could see fear in the outlines of the woman's face.

"But she didn't give up," Higano said. "Reina was determined one way or another to get her father to see her as a woman. She made several

failed attempts. Finally, she came to believe: ‘If he’s so normal, then I’ll have to make him go crazy.’”

The woman gasped.

“Reina knew someone close to her who had the ideal love she wanted. She wanted to become her, to replace her. She was obsessed with this. And she knew that she could do it if she managed one thing. She waited for that chance for a long time. Then came the family vacation in Portugal. Reina brought Yumi to the tourist spot Cabo da Roca to get her alone.”

The woman was shaking.

“Wait,” she said. “Don’t say anything else.”

It was a plea.

The woman hadn’t begged for her life or even lost her composure despite knowing Higano might kill her. But now, for the first time, she showed signs of being upset. Unable to take any more, she wriggled her hands bound behind her back and shook her head. Her back trembled when she breathed.

Thrusting the secret before her might just break this beautiful woman. She was as elusive as a cloud because she herself had looked away from reality. She had fooled herself more than anyone with her own misdirection.

And once the deception was peeled away, like a dust-covered piece of tape, it wouldn’t stick to anything ever again.

Musing on this, Higano thought, Why am I holding back something so insignificant?

Seiren Higano was a serial killer, after all.

So without any hesitation, he continued, “This is the secret that Reina wanted to hide. The thing she hid her whole life until she became Miss Direction. The reason she created the Reinas and ran away. She—” He let out a breath and said, “—she killed her mother.”

The woman was dripping with sweat and her breath was ragged. Given the revelation, her reaction was no surprise. But she was bound by the rope and powerless to do anything. All she could do was sit there and accept the truth Higano was laying out.

Once a serial killer caught his prey, there was already no chance of escape.

“It seems like Reina Myoko herself was much more human than I thought. She loved her father and took revenge on the people who hurt him. She killed her mother so she could have all of his love to herself. This is no ordinary behavior, but her motivation, at least, is within the realm of understanding. But she was unable to live with what she did. Miss Direction was the result of her averting her gaze from the truth. That’s human, in a certain sense.”

The woman was trying to get her breath under control.

“A girl who loved her father like that wouldn’t just hand him over to the other Reinas, isn’t that so? If you think about it, the idea that you all could fool your blood relatives too is unthinkable, right? I was completely—no, excuse me. You didn’t mean to deceive anyone.”

He looked at Yumi Myoko’s face on the tablet again.

She and the woman in front of him resembled each other.

The two women weren’t biologically related. Yet they looked incredibly similar. The shapes of their faces were remarkably close—but the rest of them, not at all. Yet the impressions both women cast were nearly identical.

This wasn’t resemblance—it was imitation.

In order to mimic the woman her father loved.

“You said it from the beginning—you aren’t Asami Ino.” He exhaled softly. “You’re the real Reina Myoko.”

Now that the truth about her killing her mother had been revealed, Reina’s will to live, already weak, had completely disappeared.

Her spirit died before the knife could kill her.

Higano removed Reina's blindfold. It no longer mattered if she saw what he looked like.

With her vision back, she grimaced in the bright light, glanced at Higano, and instinctually flashed a polite smile before large tears began rolling down her face. She said nothing and was wracked with tears.

Higano took out a white handkerchief and wiped away the tears.

Once she'd taken a moment to recover, Reina looked at Higano and said, "Would you give me a little more coffee?"

"Unfortunately, it's all cold now."

"I don't mind."

He considered making a new cup, but in the end only picked up the cup in front of her. Perhaps it was this cold coffee that she wanted instead of a fresh brew.

He poured the coffee into her mouth. She didn't spill any, perhaps because her vision had been restored to her.

He watched her delicate throat pulse as she finished the cup.

"It's sad," she mused. "No matter how perfect the technique, even delicious coffee gets cold with time, loses all its flavor, and ends up tasting worse than a cup from any old coffee shop."

Higano nodded.

"It's just as you put it." Reina looked off into the distance, as though remembering something, and repeated, "Reina's secret was that she killed her mother."

Then she laughed, tacking on to her previous statement:

"That's a much more ordinary secret than you'd imagined, I bet." Reina Myoko reflected on her life.

"I killed my mother Yumi at Cabo da Roca and was able to take the love my dad had for her. I mimicked her looks, her expressions, and her

character. That's how I managed to entice my father. He was conflicted, but in the end he couldn't bear his grief at losing his wife. So he lost to my seduction. He was a decent guy. He always felt guilty about sleeping with me, but I was able to manipulate those emotions to spice things up. I made him jealous, too. That's why I was dating so many different guys. As expected, my dad lost it. My love turned him into a puppet."

Reina looked directly into Higano's blue eyes, but her focus was somewhere else.

"However, even though I had done this all for myself...I reached my mental limit. No matter how good I was at repressing my feelings, I couldn't escape the guilt of killing my mother. It hurt to be around my dad. I ran away from home to try to reset my life."

"It wasn't your average running away, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. I'd thought about turning the Bumblebees into Reina Myoko. I prepared for a long time. I never appeared in photos. I didn't let anyone get to know me or even notice me. I wanted other people to not know if I had really existed or not. And I knew it was possible to pull this off with my own ability to amplify my presence, seem larger-than-life. Once I had made the Reinas, I could take revenge on all the people who had demeaned my father. Of course, there were many ways to take revenge. But I guess it was just like me to choose this rather ridiculous method of creating the Reinas."

Basically it was her "nature."

Nevertheless, her desire to avenge her father and her guilt over killing her mother made her seem more human. Reina was far-removed from the mystique her initial impression gave off.

"It might be weird to say this, but it was fun to watch everything work out even better than I'd dreamed it would. The Bumblebees became even better Reinas than I imagined, and they gradually turned that unexpected revenge into a reality. At times they even exceeded my imagination."

The problem was—

Obviously, what didn't add up was—

“Ha...ha...haha,” Higano began to laugh.

He reached for the attache case under his desk. He entered a code into the lock and took out the contents.

Inside the case was a masquerade mask, the kind that rich people wore at parties. The mask was dazzlingly decorated with jewels and a golden butterfly. This was what had earned Higano the nickname Masquerade.

He put it on.

Under the mask, Higano's smile widened, broadening from his usual grin into an innocent expression that clashed with his cold demeanor. Most people would consider this look, so different from his usual, charming.

But Higano himself, his eyes twinkling as he smiled, thought he looked ugly with this expression of pure joy. He didn't want to be seen this way in public.

Yes, the mask was a way for Higano to hide his face.

“Ahhhhaha...haha.”

Truth always stripped itself bare before Higano's superior intellect. It was automatic for his mind, incredibly simple, monotonous work. And for Higano, all of life was merely a repetition of that monotonous work.

However, on rare occasions—*extremely* rare occasions—Higano discovered an unexpected answer in the truths he compulsively drew from the world. He was overjoyed when he encountered these answers. They were the only time he ever felt alive.

“You're Reina Myoko. Which means this.” He tried to suppress a smile beneath the mask. “The Reinas *copying* your life are trying to kill the *original* Reina.”

The blood drained from Reina's face.

Higano thought of the Japanese foliage spider. Before giving birth, the females built leaf nests shaped like rice dumplings, making an enclosed

space where they lay their egg sacs. After the children are born, they begin to eat the only source of nutrition in the tiny space: their own mother. They devour the mother's innards and kill her. For the mother, the nest she made herself as a breeding space was also her own coffin.

Just like these women. After giving up their past selves and taking on new lives as Reina Myoko, they no longer had any need for the parent who produced them. They stole her name, her life—everything.

The problem wasn't Reina Myoko.

It was the Bumblebees.

The Reinas, counterfeits from the very beginning, were clearly unnatural.

“They peeled off my mask and didn't need me anymore.”

This was the worst-case scenario Reina had to face.

“I was extremely skilled at misdirections, but the Reinas I created weren't. The Reinas weren't duplicates of *me*—they were copies of my illusion of Reina. The *illusion* of Reina was greater, more pure, more capable, and more beautiful than me, the real thing. The girls who faithfully copied this illusion surpassed me before long. They each became monsters of their own creation. Monsters that manipulated people and things as they desired and had the ability to destroy others in brutal, cunning ways.”

Reina's shapely lips were quivering.

“I, on the other hand, was unable to get over my attachment to my father. Rather than become a monster like them, I returned to our relationship. Then I even got pregnant...and of course I wanted to have a child with the person I loved. But I couldn't make things more difficult for him. So after much hard consideration, I aborted it. The sense of loss I felt once the baby was gone was awful and I was overcome with a sense of emptiness. I felt that nothing mattered anymore.”

Reina looked into Higano's blue eyes and said, “I decided to stop being Reina Myoko.”

“But the Reinas wouldn’t let you exist that way.”

“Yes. It didn’t matter that all they saw of me was just an illusion; that didn’t change the fact that I was Reina Myoko. I had shackled them. But when I tried to escape, they finally realized the critical thing was to maintain the system of Reinas we’d created—to eliminate my real existence behind the illusion. The real Reina Myoko was actually an obstacle for their future development and ability to become a sanctified ‘Reina Myoko.’”

It was a crazy story.

Much stranger than Higano could have predicted himself.

Which is why he was smiling under his mask.

“It’s starting to make sense. I imagined that the Bumblebees were unusual, but other than trying to kill you, was there anything particularly monstrous that they did?”

Reina nodded. “One made hundreds of millions through the secret club of celebrities.

“Another got into politics as a secretary and plotted to take down a political party through a member of the National Diet.

“And a third hijacked the aims of a massive humanitarian aid group and was trying to incite a war.”

“They were serious threats,” Higano said.

They seemed worse than serial killers, he thought, but he quickly laughed and realized that it was comparing six of one, half dozen of the other.

“They no longer have any feelings. They have no true selves. They are a system, and not even I, their creator, can stop them. However, as the one who brought them into the world, I have to do something about these monsters. I was about to give up, but it looks like I might have one last chance.”

Reina had seemed hopeless, but now there was determination in her

eyes.

“Please, Mr. Serial Killer,” she pleaded, bringing her hands to her heart. “Please kill me—kill Reina Myoko.”

—

Higano took off his mask, injected Reina’s calf with anesthetic, and then began his work.

Her request for death wasn’t a hopeless case of abandoning herself. It was her final act of opposition against the monstrous Reinas.

If Masquerade killed her, the world would know her name as his—Masquerade’s—victim. If everyone knew she had died, the Bumblebees would no longer be able to continue their fabricated existence as Reina Myoko. She was aiming to take back their identity and neutralize it.

However, while she could take the name Reina Myoko back, Higano was by no means convinced, from their conversation thus far, that the other girls would return to the people they had been before. They had already become monsters. Their brakes had been disabled long ago. No one had control over how fast they were going.

They’d keep acting like monsters, only now with a nameless existence.

Or, there was another possibility.

They’d just get rid of the name Reina Myoko.

Hadn’t they tried to kill Reina as revenge for how she’d meaninglessly taken their existences?

If that was true, then this entire case had begun when they had tried to slice her neck. The case should have been called:

The Nameless Women’s Revenge.

Higano poured hot water from a kettle into a pot and allowed the temperature to near 181 degrees. He put a paper filter into the brewer, added the coffee grinds, and allowed the grinds to bloom before he slowly drizzled the remaining water over the filter in a slow circle. After he’d

brewed enough, he removed the pour-over filter. The first drops of coffee always tasted best, and the later brew only became more and more diluted. You couldn't let the last drops go into the pot.

Higano set out Royal Copenhagen cups and filled them with coffee. He had to admit that he could certainly make a fine cup of coffee; he smiled slightly.

Before he killed, he always liked to have rich Guatemalan beans.

Until a moment ago, Reina had seemed hopelessly desperate, but now she looked cheerful. A burden had been lifted: She was doing what she should, and she would defeat the monsters. Her spirits were so high she was even smiling.

It would've been too cruel to tell her that the monsters weren't going anywhere.

Because the truth had very little value.

Higano had a sip of coffee, took a breath, and then said to Reina, "I thought you might ask me to kill you."

"Really? It sounds like you're calling me predictable. You're wrong."

"I'm sorry if you've misunderstood me. But I didn't mean that, just that this is how things always are. I only ever decide to kill people who aren't very attached to their lives."

Reina smiled and tilted her head. "That's a strange thing to say. By that definition, would serial killers ever kill someone of their own volition? The way you worded it makes the victim sound like the willful party. It also sounds like you're a little apprehensive about the idea of killing someone."

"Yes, it does sound like that, doesn't it? I can see why you'd say that... My apologies. I always killed of my own will. The murders were absolutely sinful acts whether the victims were attached to their lives or not."

"You're a weird one. Do you get any pleasure from your murders? I'd

only expect that of a serial killer...”

“This I can say definitively: I don’t. For me, there’s nothing more unbearably mortifying.”

Reina, perhaps surprised by this statement, opened her eyes wide. “Well, then why do you do it?”

Higano hesitated and then selected a single word: “Justice.”

He hesitated because that word wasn’t quite right. However, he couldn’t find a more accurate alternative to express his motives.

“I’m guilty of killing my mother and bringing about the monsters—killing me would be doing justice. Isn’t that what you mean?”

“No, I don’t care about that at all. That’s unrelated. It would take forever for me to explain it, I—”

“Forget about it then. I’m starting to get sleepy from the injection you gave me anyway. But when you said justice was your motivation, I wanted to let you know how I really felt.” Then, Reina said, as though she were having a joke, “I was disappointed.”

Her eyes had become vacant. Just as she said, the anesthetic was starting to take effect.

Higano took the comment in stride.

Of course she would say that. He wasn’t killing Reina to save her. He was only killing her because his own goals required it.

Because Masquerade’s story required it.

Miss Direction.

That was the perfect name for Reina Myoko, a woman who drove people crazy and produced nameless monsters.

“Ahh.” Reina’s eyes snapped open. “I’m about to die and finally realized how I could’ve prevented my life from going off the rails.”

Her cheeks were flushed with excitement.

“I needed someone who would have exposed all of my misdirections. If

only there had been someone in front of me who relentlessly pursued the truth, I might have found my way back!”

Then she spoke her last words in this life.

“Someone, please help.”

But her plea had nothing to do with Higano.

He was, after all, a serial killer shrouded in lies.

Higano abhorred the truth and worshipped fabrication; he was the exact opposite of the kind of person who would’ve saved her.

—

In his office, under the Aeron chair, Higano had installed a trap door with a fingerprint lock. He opened the small door, through which a large person would barely fit, and descended a simple metal ladder. Motion-activated LED lights flashed on, and the cameras installed in the ceiling were activated. This setup recorded whenever someone entered the 30-foot wide basement space. The room was made from unfinished concrete. This was where Higano had killed many of his victims.

All the evidence of the things he used to kill were here: pharmaceuticals, various implements, knives. There was even a spare mask. Everything linked to Masquerade had been collected in this basement. If police searched the house and looked into this room, they’d immediately determine that Higano was Masquerade.

Higano had no compunctions about that. Indeed, he wanted to confess everything to whomever caught him.

He straightened his white sleeves.

Reina Myoko was passed out on the concrete floor, looking like Snow White. The birthmark near her collarbone was seductively exposed.

Higano removed the knife from her chest and, unsurprisingly, blood began to spurt out. Even with the gore, the expression on Higano’s face didn’t shift.

She was unconscious, but she was still lightly breathing. He hoped that the anesthesia was working properly and that she felt no pain.

As usual, Higano had his chainsaw at hand to cut off the victim's most beautiful body part.

He took off her brand new pumps with the same care he made the coffee, and gently peeled off her stockings, as though he were handling a virgin. Higano didn't forget the minimum standard of respect that should be given to his victims.

Reina's left foot was so perfectly balanced that it almost seemed like a CG rendering, and now it was fully exposed. Without any sentimental fanfare, Higano turned on the chainsaw and cut off her left foot.

When he was finished with the work, he took the foot in his hands, still wearing the surgical gloves, and stared at it.

That's when he noticed something. For a moment he was struck speechless.

“What's this...!”

He'd missed something.

Something he'd never be able to fix.

He held a hand to his mouth in disbelief and examined the foot closely again. But it was unmistakable.

For the first time since he had been born, Higano looked upward and cursed the heavens.

Reina's beautiful, perfect foot—

—

—was blemished with blisters.

—

“Miss Direction...You really kept me from seeing the most important thing until the very end!”

The serial killer Masquerade had rules.

His rules didn't have any particular deeper meaning. They just were. When he killed he always wore a white coat. He always had a cup of coffee made from beans he ground himself an hour before the murder. He always cut off the face. The victims were always women who had body parts of unrivaled beauty. Etcetera, etcetera.

And the blisters on Reina's foot meant that she would never have been one of his victims.

"I can't..." Higano moaned. "I can't make this one of Masquerade's kills."

It was inconsistent—

—with Seiren Higano's personal aesthetic.

Objectively considered, his reasoning must've seemed insane. And Higano himself was well aware of this. He was the only one who knew of his strict rules. Furthermore, he'd been planning on disposing of her foot without anyone knowing.

He was the only one in the world who couldn't come to terms with the blisters.

But though he fully recognized this, it didn't matter. Breaking his own rules was too terrifying a proposition. He couldn't count this as one of Masquerade's kills. It would've been like loosening a small screw but not knowing exactly what purpose the screw had served. Loosening the screw might cause everything to descend into madness and result in his total breakdown.

No, Higano understood very well. He knew that was right, but at the same time, it was pure sophistry.

So in the end...

"I feel awful," he said.

He was physiologically incapable of breaking the rules.

He leaned back against the concrete wall, still tightly gripping Reina's

foot. He held the foot against his chest and embraced it like a long-lost lover.

Internally, he was wracked with pain. He felt as though his body had been crushed by some lumbering beast. His head ached as though it had been hit with a lead pipe.

Higano derived no pleasure from killing, and being assaulted by any emotions in the middle of the act rendered him unable to kill. Because he hadn't followed the rules, he was overcome with the guilt of his murder and could no longer think of it as a purely mechanical procedure.

Higano's aesthetic, rigidly defined by the strict rules he'd set for himself, were what had enabled him to kill without hesitation.

This is why he could never violate his aesthetic.

So Higano decided his next step fairly naturally.

"I'll...make it up."

As easily as though he had done it before, Higano decided to frame someone.

—

"Well then," Higano said. "What am I going to do now?"

—

He took off his white coat, speckled with blood. Underneath, a bespoke black Armani suit skimmed over the lines of his lean physique. He folded the white coat carefully so as to not stain his suit, and hung it over his arm. The refined gesture gave him the air of a capable butler swiftly clearing away his master's tablecloth.

Higano glanced down at the dead body.

The muddy waters of Tokyo Bay washed in gentle waves against the concrete tetrapod blocks near the shore. On top of one block lay the body of a beautifully-proportioned woman. She was dead. A slender leg dipped into the water. It was easy to imagine that, when she'd been alive, she'd

been captivating: her slender, seductive limbs stretched out from a flashy, well-tailored dress. She had a beauty mark on her collar bone that heightened her charm. Her long, well-manicured nails were blood red and even a little mysterious.

But this glamorous mystique was quickly punctured.

Her beautiful left leg was severed at the ankle. The foot was gone.

The corpse's face had also been scraped off so the contours were ruined. Her once-elegant features were completely unrecognizable.

These signs all suggested the crime had been committed by Seiren Higano, also known as the serial killer Masquerade.

However, throughout his career Higano had removed many faces, and he judged the technique used on this corpse as extremely crude. The lips and everything on the face above the nose remained intact; conversely, the neck had been needlessly cut up. It wasn't very attractive.

"This is unacceptable."

Higano turned his head and averted his gaze, unable to look any longer.

He calmed down quickly once he could no longer see the body.

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From that point, Higano forged the entire incident, which was clearly one of Masquerade's killings, into an entirely different crime.

I'll make it a suicide, he thought.

The moment he decided to fabricate the case entirely, the perfect scenario came to mind.

Motivation was no issue. He knew Reina had conceived her father Koichiro's child. Most normal people would consider suicide in a case like that.

However, there was one major obstacle to his cover-up story.

He had already cut off her left foot. Was there anyone anywhere in the world who would commit suicide by first cutting off their own foot? In

order to complete his lie, he had to surmount this fundamental problem. He needed a clear reason why she would have to cut off her foot.

Perhaps, he thought, he could turn Reina's suicide into her ultimate gamble—an attempt to entrap Koichiro. He'd frame the case to show that she despised him so much that something like killing him wouldn't be enough for her. Of course that hadn't been the true story, but that's how he would frame it.

Reina would have tried to think of the cruelest method of revenge and decided that the worst thing she could do was to frame Koichiro for his own daughter's murder. That way she would reveal to the world that he was an awful human who had brainwashed his adopted daughter into being his sex slave and then killed her off when she got inconvenient.

If he could convey exactly how devastated Reina had been by the abortion, it would even be possible to have Koichiro falsely testify that he'd killed her himself. And if he played his cards right, he might be able to settle the whole thing as a murder committed by Koichiro rather than a suicide.

Higano came up with all of this in an instant in the basement room below his office. He had no time to hesitate. If he cut off Reina's face after she died, her body's reactions would make it impossible to disguise as a suicide.

Reina was on the floor. He checked that she was still alive and quickly got the electric planer going. Then he cut off her beautiful face from the nose down, leaving her eyes intact.

He had to cover up the scar on her neck from the Bumblebees' attempt on her life, and he focused on cutting that area up. If any of the wound was identifiable, the police would naturally look into the details. Then they'd quickly realize that that scar was from long before she was killed. He wanted to prevent the case from going off into any unpredictable directions. In the worst case scenario, Higano would lose control over the case if the police started to look into whether the Reinas had actually been the ones to cut her neck.

Because of this, Higano violated his aesthetic completely in the crude way he cut up Reina's neck and face. He ended up with a product he couldn't bear to look at.

6:38 P.M. Higano took his car, to plant Reina's severed foot in her apartment in Sumida Ward. To be more accurate, the apartment wasn't hers alone; the Reinas shared it. They each had separate hideouts, but Higano hadn't yet discovered them.

Higano snuck into the apartment. It had been meticulously cleared of all individuality so no one could learn anything about the personalities of the Reinas. He left Reina's foot inside, along with a chipped knife identical to the one used to kill her. He had planted the broken chip of the second knife in her body.

He wiped everything he touched with a cloth to indicate clearly that someone had come to get rid of fingerprints, and then left. He drove his car the half mile to the parking lot and moved Reina's body from his car into her BMW. Then he headed for the park on the water he had in mind.

7:05 P.M. Higano arrived at the park in Odaiba. For his trick to work, he had to get someone to go to the apartment. Higano had learned by looking at Reina's smartphone that the Reinas, including the original Reina, kept track of what the others were doing by using a shared LINE account that could make VoIP⁷ phone calls. He'd discovered that Shota Akiyama was the only person involved with the Reinas who could go to the apartment immediately..

Notably, Shota had never been involved with the original Reina. The person he thought was Reina was one of the Bumblebees. So Higano couldn't use a voicemail from the original Reina to get him to come over. He had to rely on a silent message. At 7:11 P.M. he called Shota through LINE from his car. Because it was a shared account, the Bumblebees obviously were able to see what had happened.

Next, he sent a message to Koichiro, asking him to pick up Reina's car near the park and, by doing so, creating the definitive evidence of Koichiro having driven the BMW. Even if Koichiro realized the message

wasn't from Reina and then claimed he took direction from the criminal over a text message, Higano wouldn't run into any issues. By framing the case as a suicide, even this would be attributed to being part of Reina's ruse.

7:20 P.M. Higano confirmed that no one was around and arranged the body on the tetrapods in the park. He didn't forget to put her left leg in the water. He put the first knife that had actually been used to stab Reina in a plastic bag, along with her smartphone and a weight. He threw it in the water not far from the body. Even if the items were discovered, it would look like she mustered the last of her strength right as she was about to die to get rid of the evidence. He also put the electric planer he had actually used to cut off her face into the trunk of the BMW.

With all that, all of his preparations would be finished once he returned his car.

7:45 P.M.

No longer wanting to look at the state of the body, Higano left the scene.

—

The serial killer Seiren Higano turned his attention to a familiar walking path. The street was so deserted it was as though the city had completely forgotten it.

When the case came to light, Officer Yamaji would, as always, ask Higano for help. Yamaji trusted him completely. All Higano had to do now, as a detective, would be to make up some theories to guide Yamaji into believing the story he'd woven.

He must remember to hint that Reina may have completely lost her mind. If he couldn't convince them that she was crazy, they'd never believe that she would cut off her own foot and face. He had to heighten her mystique and make them see her as a lunatic.

Fortunately, there was plenty of material that made Miss Direction seem insane. The complete lack of photographs, for one. But all of that had been the basis for his plan in the first place, of course.

Higano crossed his arms.

His main problem still remained—the Bumblebees.

He'd sent messages from the Reinas' shared account, so he figured that sooner or later they would probably realize that the original Reina had died. But even if they didn't, he'd have to deal with them at some point.

First he had to determine how they'd reveal themselves.

There was no way that the Bumblebees *wouldn't* do something. If they left the case alone, the police would look into everything about Reina's past, and there was a chance their true identities would be revealed. There was a chance the Bumblebees would be forced to return to the nobodies they had been before becoming Reina Myoko. That was something they'd do anything to prevent.

What exactly would they decide to do?

Higano predicted that the police would pigeonhole the case as one they couldn't investigate too deeply. In that case, even though this was a gruesome crime, the victim's name—in other words, Reina Myoko's name—wouldn't be publicized in the media.

But if the police knew politicians and other big names were involved, would they still hide the name? Maybe it was best to make them think the crime had been committed by some "syndicate" that not even the police could touch. The police might buy his outrageous story, but he couldn't be careless. The Reinas were actually well connected with powerful people, and they'd brainwashed everyone around them. They wouldn't hesitate to kill.

Assuming that Higano was able to convince them that a syndicate of big names was responsible for Reina's murder, at the behest of the Reinas, he'd be able to exclude himself as one of the suspects.

And if he did that, maybe he could leave the rest of the case alone?

Higano immediately shook his head at the idea. Putting his fate in the hands of the Bumblebees, who could never be trusted, was about the worst thing he could do. It was only a matter of time before they turned

on him.

They were enemies, and he had to be the one using them. If he could make the police think Reina was the leader of these monsters, Reina's mystique could do the rest for him. It could help reinforce the suicide story.

He couldn't let down his guard against the Bumblebees. They were illusory manifestations who had completely consumed their original.

Yet for all their power, even the Bumblebees still weren't Higano's biggest opponent.

Because, after all, they lived a completely inauthentic existence.

It was impossible for Higano to lose to them on an artificial plane. That was the miracle of Masquerade.

No one would ever uncover the truth.

No matter how anyone went after the truth, it would remain hidden as long as nothing out of his projections popped up.

Once he was convinced of that, Higano's mood changed and he completely lost interest in the body. He walked off and didn't even turn his head to glance back.

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As the serial killer Seiren Higano strolled down his usual morning walk, he mulled over using Crystal Mountain or Mandarin beans for his coffee. He smiled and also pondered the target for his next kill.

Well then, what am I going to do now?

That's what Higano had murmured to himself in front of the body, but he wasn't referring to this case.

He was already thinking about the dramatic way he was going to kill his next target.

⁵ When coffee beans are roasted, the heat traps CO₂ inside the bean. During a pour over, you can pour hot water on coffee grounds which

causes them to release the CO₂ immediately, causing the bloom effect.

⁶ This is a play on words on the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (自由民主党), which has held power near continuously since 1955

⁷ Voice over Internet Protocol.

Eiji Mikage is the author of several novels and light novels. He withdrew from Nihon University to pursue writing and debuted in 2005 with *Bokura wa dokonimo hirakanai* (*We Open Nowhere*), which was a finalist for the Dengeki Novel Award. He has since published many novels including *Kasumi Reina wa kokora ni iru* (*Reina Kasumi Is Here*) and the series *Utsuro no hako to zero no Maria* (*The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria*).

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